

Fountain of Revenge

Richard Dodge Davidson

About this book

This is the story of two young ambitious New York City attorneys who are asked by their managing partner to go to Georgia to investigate a legend of the Cherokee Nation concerning a special formula and resulting potion which can actually lengthen the human life span. Unfortunately, they are not the only ones looking for this formula and the twists and turns of their assignment soon prove dangerous and the results very unpredictable. The search for their client may shorten the attorneys' lifespan and lead to remarkable and unexpected results.

About the author

Richard Dodge Davidson is a retired attorney and author living outside of Orlando, Florida with his wife and two dogs.

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The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my wife Judy, and my adult children Chris, Scott and Julie.

Chapter One

The Legend is Their Case

The man with the goatee stared down at Rod Larren, the new associate in the vast caverns of Manhattan.

“This is not a simple patent case, son. I think we can find the Fountain of Youth, and it isn’t in Florida.”

Rod felt the penetrating eyes and tried to decipher the messaging smile on the stranger across the table.

“Well, Professor Hippa, you can’t mean the real Fountain of Youth,” interjected the young blond fellow associate across the table. “That’s just a story, but it certainly would be nice for taking a shower,” said Mixie Cooper. She turned her head toward senior partner Larman Kingfund and widened her eyes as she smiled. That mannerism just drove Rod crazy, and he could not help his feeling of irritation over that woman.

The professor looked at the young lady, an image from the beaches of California. Her long blond hair and slim body disarmed most men, but her quick mind often modified the first impression. Rod knew he was the “other associate” when it came to Larman Kingfund, the most powerful partner in a very prestigious firm.

Larman always seemed to call Mixie first for any significant project. Nevertheless, if she needed help, or perhaps out of some charitable momentary whim, she would ask Rod to be her assistant. Someone had to hold the door for her, he surmised. She was one of a number of irritants existing in the stressful factory known as the law firm’s associate pool at 394 Madison Avenue.

The professor stroked his goatee. He fished the cherry out of his drink. “I keep telling myself it’s crazy, but its implications are beyond description. That’s why I’ve come to you, Larman. You are reputed to be the best patent attorney in New York. I need to have you restore my sanity or the alternative here, discover the formula that has defined the search of my career.”

Larman smiled but did not enter the conversation. The old managing partner peered first at Rod and then at Mixie.

The tufts of grey hair seemed to stick out more from Larman’s large head than usual. He leaned over the table and stared at the professor. Several seconds

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passed, and then he talked slowly, peering over the top of his reading glasses. “Yes, professor, of course, we understand. The sensitivity of this matter is potentially so great that I didn’t want to meet with you in the office but thought this venue would be better.”

“Yes, well that is good,” said Professor Hippa. “The personal danger to us makes extraordinary behavior prudent.”

“Personal danger?” said Mixie.

“Now Professor, let’s not become too dramatic. I don’t want to scare my talented associates off,” said Larman.

“Well, we have had one suspicious death you know, Mr. Kingfund, and...the value of this quest is inestimable,” continued the professor.

“I’m sorry,” said Rod. “I’m really lost here. What is this matter all about?” He looked at Larman. Then he looked over at Mixie.

Larman peered over the top of his glasses again.

“Since the professor is paying our very substantial hourly rate, let me summarize why we are here tonight.”

“Yes, please, Larman, we need to proceed. I am fearful of what may await me when I get back to North Carolina.”

Larman looked up as the waitress brought the main course. “Food and drink are one of my passions. And they make any story more entertaining.”

Neither Rod nor Mixie touched their forks. They kept staring at Larman.

“Well, then let’s get the story moving,” said Larman.

The senior partner looked around the table as if he was making a speech to the crowd. “The professor is a chemist and biologist from the University of North Carolina. His specialty is human longevity and the aging process.”

As the two young associates sat spellbound, Professor Hippa described, in summary terms, the nature of his research and the scientists’ slow progress in understanding the true triggers and blocks to human cell aging. Rod ate his steak while he listened to the professor describe, in some detail, the experiments he was conducting at the university.

“This sounds like science fiction,” said Mixie. “I thought this was a patent case.”

“It’s not science fiction. It is very real and very current,” said Professor Hippa. He placed his hand on Mixie’s forearm. “Our studies and experiments to date involve simple organisms. We have increased the lifespan of a yeast cell by using the DNA inside the cell’s nuclear envelope. We think it’s possible to increase a human’s life span by changing the setting of a switch for DNA in the cells of our own bodies.”

“Cell’s nuclear envelope?” asked Rod. He had gotten all A’s in high school biology, but he needed to slow down the professor.

“Yes,” continued Professor Hippa. “The DNA of all cells is enclosed in a ball-like structure called the nuclear envelope. Though most cells in the human body have the same genes, each cell type uses a different set of genes. For example, the genetic information needed to form skin or liver cells is very different. The fraction of DNA which isn’t used by a particular cell is ‘switched off’ and stored next to this nuclear envelope.”

“Will turning this DNA ‘on’ change the cell?” asked Mixie.

Professor Hippa smiled at Mixie. Rod could see that he enjoyed lecturing on his research. “No, Mixie, turning on these switches tends to cause premature aging, and that’s the subject we have been researching to date. We have developed techniques to switch the ‘on’ regions back ‘off’ and restore the normal cellular lifespan. This process in the lab seems to correct these DNA defects and restores normal lifespan in premature aging patients...and what works for premature aging could also be applied to normal aging.”

“So, keeping these DNA switches turned off can prolong life in yeast cells,” asked Rod, “How does that relate to humans?”

“Well, Rod, that’s the big leap, but the cell activities of the yeast cells are similar to the activities in the human cells. We’re testing the ability of various drugs and treatments to restore the proper ‘switched off’ state to DNA regions whose release from the nuclear envelope is linked to a shorter lifespan in both yeast and human cells.”

“Well,” said Mixie, that certainly is a fantastic possibility, but what is this personal danger stuff?”

Professor Hippa looked over at Larman, and then around the room. He waited until the waitress walked by the table and out of the immediate area.

The possibility of finding a method or substance to affect cells in this way is worth a tremendous amount of money to a lot of very large corporations. I think there has been one murder already, and that’s why I have come to Larman,” continued the professor

“We are certainly flattered,” said Larman, “and your reference to a murder may be premature, professor.”

The professor looked troubled. “I received a note in the mail about two years ago from a woman named Betsy Satterly, who lived in Calhoun, Georgia. She lived near the New Exhota State Historical Site, the former capital city of the Cherokee Indian Nation in Georgia. Her ancestors were some high-level chieftains in the Cherokee Nation. They lived in this area of Georgia before the forced removal of the Cherokees from Northern Georgia during the Trail of

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Tears in the late 1830's. Several of her ancestors avoided the removal by marrying some white settlers, and a branch of the family tree became the Satterly family."

Rod sat listening, wondering how this history of the Satterly family was relevant to the professor's studies, or to the background of this new client of the firm.

Professor Hippa continued, "This elderly woman, Mrs. Satterly, came to see me shortly thereafter in Chapel Hill, about a month after I had responded to her note. I was very interested in talking to her, since she had contacted me after reading a scholarly article I had written about the extension of life, or as we call it, 'the Fountain of Youth Phenomena.' You see, I quickly learned that Mrs. Satterly was near the end of her life, as she confided to me that she was in very poor health."

Larman was studying the faces of both Mixie and Rod, and interrupted the professor briefly saying, "This is the part when I started to get interested in the professor's story. This is the remarkable possibility."

Mixie, shifted her weight in the chair, and lowered her glass to the table, as she leaned slightly toward the professor. Rod looked at Larman, and then at the professor, trying to figure where this conversation was going.

Professor Hippa continued, "As we have discussed, my colleagues and I have done twenty years of research into cell and molecular switches, and the effects of various complex substances on these switches, with the result that we have established general principles. Unfortunately, this knowledge comes with big holes and continuing questions. We keep digging for the possibility of ways to slow down the aging process, or even stopping or reversing it."

Professor Hippa hesitated for a moment, since he now perceived that he had everyone's attention, and his delay seemed to heighten the dramatic effect.

"Reversing it?" asked Rod. The waiter approached, and the table became silent.

The professor addressed the question from Rod. "Well, reversing it was beyond our wildest expectation, but the slowing process, and the chance of holding the aging process, was still a remote possibility, though a minuscule one. But Mrs. Satterly gave us a new hope, an incredible possibility. We didn't know whether to believe her or discard her as a 'quack'."

There was a silence at the table. Professor Hippa took a sip of his coffee. Then Mixie, who had been enthralled by the story, but quiet, asked, "But professor, what did she tell you?"

Professor Hippa continued, "She told me that the legend among the Cherokees, as told by her father, was that the tribes in the area of Calhoun,

Georgia had accidentally discovered a combination of substances, which when mixed according to a formula, created a medicine with remarkable powers, namely to stop or greatly impede the aging process. Unfortunately, a few of the Cherokee inner circle found, in short order, that the substance, when taken orally, could have substantial negative side effects. This group of the Cherokee Nation guarded the secret of this substance, since they knew it could be a very potent, causing unfortunate death in the many of those who imbibed the material.”

Mixie stared at the professor, with her mouth open. Larman poured himself another cup of coffee. He had heard this story before.

“You see, we think this could lead to the drug we need to turn off the gene switches in human cells and slow down man’s aging process,” added Professor Hippa. “If this substance is the complex drug I described which is needed to affect these switches, or if it would lead us to the secrets of this possible drug, it would be magnificent.”

“But how could the Cherokee Nation develop such a substance, if you have failed in years of research and years of medical knowledge?” asked Mixie.

“Well,” responded Professor Hippa, “I assume some early ancestor came upon the substance merely by incredible chance, and it became part of the medicine man’s arsenal. I’d hate to have to calculate the chances of such an accidental find, but it could happen, I guess.”

Rod broke the silence, and asked, “But why would these people keep this substance secret? You say it could stop aging. How could they not pursue that ability?”

“Young man,” said the professor, “oral history of the Cherokee Nation implied that a number of the older tribe members taking the substance became insane, but the process and the degree of insanity occurred at different rates among the affected tribesman. The tribal history calls this substance gohida ama, which meant something like ‘long time water.’ Gohida ama had a longer effect with some of the selected recipients than others, but in the end, many succumbed to insanity, and eventual death. The legend tells of some who escaped insanity, for a reason unknown, and that is the challenge here. If this gohida ama actually existed, or exists today, and we could find its formula, we could produce it and possibly re-engineer the structure of the substance to eliminate or minimize the negative side effects. Our research in the area of slowing aging has hit a wall, and we see this Cherokee oral history as a possible route to a major breakthrough. Unfortunately, the Cherokee legend makes us believe that the medicine doctor, or the equivalent leader in the tribe, decided

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that the gohida ama was evil, and the formula must remain secret, and possessed by only a very few special leaders and their selected descendants.”

“Now comes another part which interested me,” said Larman, looking around the table.

Professor Hippa proceeded with his story. “The accounts Mrs. Satterly told me during her visit were intriguing, but I discounted them as a fairy tale told by an old woman. As I probed this lady’s memory, and spent more time with her, I became a believer, and realized the tremendous possibilities if her story were true.”

“What was her story?” asked Mixie, now fixated on the conversation.

Professor Hippa sipped his coffee, and then continued, “Mrs. Satterly and her sister Claire Winnona were two of only five people who are the keys to discovering the makeup of this gohida ama, and the ingredients to reproduce it. Though Mrs. Satterly died last year, her sister is still alive and living in Calhoun.”

“Why are these women the key to this discovery?” asked Rod.

Professor Hippa again appeared to enjoy his center stage. He continued his story.

“Unfortunately, legend has it that the disclosure of the formula for gohida ama, and how to create it, is set forth in five steps, but only two steps are known by any one person.”

“Why would each person know two steps to the formula, not just one?” asked Mixie.

“Well, good question, Mixie,” said the professor, “and the reason I was given, when I asked that same question of Mrs. Satterly, was that it was a safeguard against a step in the formula being lost by the sudden death or disappearance of any of the individuals entrusted with any particular step. My understanding is that the two steps held by each person were originally assigned at random, but each knew who the others were. Therefore, it was the responsibility of the holder of the duplicate step of the formula to replace the person who suddenly died or disappeared with another holder who would be given the step previously assigned to the dead or missing person.”

Larman continued, “Depending on who held which part of the formula for gohida ama, there would be a reshuffling of the formula steps in order to keep it intact. It was a rough method to preserve the formula, but not allow any one person to know it all and control its use.”

“Exactly,” said Professor Hippa. “In this case, however, Mrs. Satterly related to me that she and her sister controlled two steps of the formula, but her sister had a copy of a third step held by someone else in the chain of secrecy. Unfortunately, Mrs. Satterly didn’t disclose who held the third step, even if she

knew. My impression was that her sister wasn't willing to talk about any aspect of gohida ama and was committed to keeping all of its secrets."

Rod glanced at Mixie, who was staring at him, then turned back to Larman and asked, "Larman, what is our involvement here? You only deal with complex patent cases. This is only a story, isn't it?"

Larman showed little reaction to Rod's comment and looked at Professor Hippa. Then he said, "Yes, of course there's doubt. I disregarded the professor and his story after my first meeting with him in Atlanta. But then he gave me an interesting article from the Atlanta Constitution. It was an obituary for a man named Owl Omivu. It was a strange name, granted. Mr. Omivu used the name of Lone Owl and was a leader of the Cherokee Nation. The obituary listed him as dying five years ago at the age of 96, certainly an old age when he died in the Georgia Mental Institution in Atlanta. But the professor showed me an old volume of compiled tribal history of the Cherokee Nation in Northern Georgia. That is what got my attention."

"How so?" asked Mixie.

"The old history volume indicates that this Lone Owl was born in 1846. I researched the genealogy of the Cherokees in northern Georgia at some length, as did Professor Neal in our History Department. From interviews and detailed research, we concluded that the individual who just died in 2006 was the same person as Lone Owl, the Cherokee leader born in 1846."

No one at the table said anything for a moment.

Then Larman broke the silence and said, "Professor, as I have discussed with you at our earlier meeting, I find this conclusion difficult to believe. Are you sure it was not a great-great grandson, or a person with the same name?"

"It appears to be the same person, Mr. Kingfund," responded Professor Hippa.

Then Rod stared at both the professor and his senior partner. "Gentlemen, this is truly amazing stuff, and I'm somewhat speechless thinking of the possibility that this gohida ama might exist or be producible. But, how does this involve us?"

Larman looked around the table at each of the other diners for a moment. Then he said, "Professor Hippa has retained our firm to secure the patent rights for his group for the gohida ama formula, or a variant of it. Unfortunately, there are a number of investigatory issues in front of us before we can proceed with the legalities. Namely, we don't have the formula, nor do we know where to find the ingredients for gohida ama. Therefore, we have a very confidential project to be completed before we can proceed with the actual legal procedures."

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Mixie asked, “Larman, that would be a job for the chemists and biologists, why would we be involved at this point?”

The waiter approached, and Larman held up answering her question until the waiter moved away.

Then he responded, “The reason, my dear, is that the search for this gohida ama must stay within a very small group of people with the utmost confidentiality since the professor has advised me that others know of its possible existence. Unfortunately, Professor Hippa has concerns that certain specifics have leaked out already due to Mrs. Satterly’s shopping for assistance in cashing in on the formula. Such circumstances make any investigation somewhat dangerous for the participants.”

“Dangerous?” said Mixie. “I am still concerned with that comment you made earlier.”

Larman turned and looked at Professor Hippa. “Yes, the professor has advised me that Mrs. Satterly did not die of old age. She was murdered.”

Again, there was momentary silence at the table.

Professor Hippa pushed his chair back, and stood up, holding out his hand to Larman.

“I must leave now, Larman. I believe you know the assignment and understand as much background as I can give you. If your legal team does not want to get involved, knowing the background, I certainly would understand. Hopefully, I’ve not been followed here from Durham, but I can’t guarantee it. Substantial precautions have been used to keep this trip secret, though I believe my activities have been monitored for the last several months, and it’s possible that a group of sinister individuals believe I know how to get my hands on gohida ama.”

Mixie stared at Professor Hippa. Rod felt uneasy. This didn’t sound like a legal assignment at all.

Larman observed his young associates, and then he stood and extended his hand to Professor Hippa. “I understand completely, and I’m sure we can handle this assignment in an expeditious fashion. Again, professor, we appreciate you contacting us for this investigation. In all of my years of practice, I’ve never heard a story like the one you told me yesterday.”

Professor Hippa left the room, and Larman sat down, looking back at Mixie and Rod. “I think you two are the best associates in the firm. I also believe this is an assignment you should not take lightly; there’s definitely a potential for risk to your personal safety. The value of a patent for a substance to slow or eliminate aging has a potential monetary value that cannot be calculated. Obviously, there

will be people who will not hesitate to use all means to obtain the formula before us.”

“Think about this tonight,” continued Larman. “There is no obligation whatsoever. I can easily pursue Todd Gilbert or Amy Whitestone, in our Intellectual Property Department. They would be second choices, of course.

“Well, you may not need both of us,” said Mixie.

Rod thought about her comment. Who was she leaving out? he wondered.

Larman reached into his inside coat pocket. He dropped two packets on the table next to the bill the waitress had just delivered. “I have taken the step of obtaining your tickets, but if you wish, they can be changed out for someone else. You will find a complete dossier setting forth my plan. You’ll note that we are traveling separately, for obvious reasons.”

“Obvious reasons?” asked Rod.

“Our first entrance into Georgia will be incognito, as a precaution,” said Larman.

“We will pretend not to know each other?” asked Mixie.

“Exactly,” said Larman. “You, my dear, will be a cub newspaper reporter, and Rod will be a young associate lawyer in the local law firm. I’ve had my secretary make all the arrangements.”

“Wow,” said Rod.

“You’re serious?” said Mixie.

“Perfectly,” replied Larman. He laid several large bills on the table.

With that, Larman rose from his seat, and headed for the door. Mixie watched him leave. “That was an abrupt exit,” she said, looking at Rod.

Rod looked down at the floor, and then back at Mixie. “Our senior partner is really up tight with this one. He sees this legend leading to the biggest patent case in history.”

“So, Rod, what are you going to do? He may be our senior partner, but when he says ‘dangerous,’ I’m thinking no way.”

“Mixie, I would stay clear of this myself, but excitement hasn’t been a big part of my job so far at the firm, so I’m thinking I’ll be there tomorrow afternoon.”

Rod’s statement gave Mixie pause in her considerations, not wanting to lose any ground in associate competition. Whatever its purpose, Rod’s comment reset Mixie’s intentions to be an active participant in whatever this was to become, and forget about all the talk about personal safety.

“Just keep out of my way,” said Mixie. She was smiling, but Rod knew she was only half joking. She picked up the two packets of tickets and tossed one to Rod.

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“Until death do us part,” said Rod, putting the packet in his jacket.

Mixie, without further comment and her mouth open, watched Rod leave the room.

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Chapter Two

Arriving in Georgia

Mixie got to Calhoun first, though she thought the bus ride from Atlanta was humiliating. A heavysset man sat beside her and kept brushing his arm against her leg. Unfortunately, the bus was full, and there was no other seat to be had. She registered into the Gladiator Hotel downtown, and called Jack Lunner, the local editor of *The Republican*, the weekly newspaper in town. Lunner expected her call and arranged to meet her the next morning at the newspaper's suburban offices. She was its new cub reporter, dealing with local civic activities.

Rod arrived the next day, turned his bus ticket in for a train ride, and checked into the Hawthorne Hotel, also in the downtown area. Unfortunately for Rod, this hotel was not of the same quality or vintage as the Gladiator Hotel, and Rod was shaking his head over this assignment already. He made quick contact with Brad Soppenburg, a partner at Soppenburg and Wood, P.A. Soppenburg had been briefed, and Brad met him at the courthouse the next morning for introductions and instructions for this new paralegal. Rod was taken back by the fact that he was a designated paralegal, since that clearly was a position in conflict with his perception of himself as a big city lawyer. Then he realized that the failure to be a member of the Georgia Bar was probably an impediment to a higher professional standing.

Larman, as expected, had done the work and set up each of their new identities and contacts. He should have been in the FBI, thought Rod, as he studied the memorandum Larman had given both of them as part of the ticket package.

No sign of Larman, however, and no communication between Rod and Mixie; that was the instruction. Rod would follow the orders, but if Mixie happened to stumble upon him, they could certainly socialize as passing strangers, he mused. It would be nice to have a friend in town.

The next two weeks went quickly for Rod. He was assigned a case involving a defendant named Masterson, who happened to be a prominent member of the local Cherokee community. No accident, he thought, though he believed Brad Soppenburg knew little about the nature of his assignment, but was glad to get a retainer for the arrangement.

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Rod also noted that Mixie arrived and entered local society when he read a small article in *The Republican* that a new cub reporter by the name of Mixie Cooper had been hired and would be covering the local social scene, including the part of town with Cherokee population. Surprisingly, and without warning, Rod ran into Mixie at a local Chamber of Commerce Dinner he had been coaxed to attend by Brad Soppenburg. And who else sat at their table but the eccentric writer, Larman Kingfund, a recent visitor and novelist studying the area.

Rod knew he needed to start somewhere in order to learn more about the background of the Cherokee legend concerning the existence of gohida ama. It sounded as crazy to him as the Fountain of Youth stories he heard as a child. The logical place to look, he surmised, would be the probate records of the deceased Betsy Satterly. According to the information Larman gave him, she had admitted to being one of the individuals holding two stages of the secret formula. Yes, he thought, the probate records would be the first area to investigate. Being a paralegal, going to the courthouse was an activity he could conduct without raising any amount of suspicion or question.

The Gordon County Courthouse was relatively new and sat at the end of the main street in the city. It had a Georgian feel to it, and the records department was near the back of the building. Rod was relieved to learn that most of the probate records had been computerized, so he wouldn't have to use the old filing system or wade through the musty and smelly shelves. He found the records for the Estate of Betsy Satterly, and noted that she had died intestate under the laws of the State of Georgia. He also determined that the attorneys for the Estate were from his new firm in Calhoun. The primary attorney for the Estate was Brad Soppenburg. That's a coincidence, Rod thought, as he went through the assets and liabilities of the Estate. His primary interest now was the list of relatives of the deceased, and he noticed that she had two sisters, both living in the outskirts of Calhoun. One sister, Mary Ann Gifford lived on Rethran Road, to the north of the city, and the other sister, Claire Winnona, lived about six miles to the east. Rod removed a yellow pad from his briefcase and took some notes from the pages of the intestate proceedings. Apparently, the two sisters shared the small estate of their murdered sister, Betsy Satterly.

It's a start, thought Rod, as he checked a few items on the trial calendar and picked up some files for Brad Soppenburg. Rod now drove his leased Mercury around town, and established a pretty good relationship with his superior Brad Soppenburg, as well as the other three partners in the small firm.

While examining the intestate proceedings for the Estate of Betsy Satterly, Rod saw final distributions were due, and a final accounting by the administrator was past due. Conveniently, Brad Soppenburg was the court appointed

administrator of the Estate, as well as its attorney, and this coincidence gave Rod a convenient excuse to talk to Brad about Mrs. Satterly.

Rod delivered the files to Brad that he had collected at the courthouse, and as he was leaving Brad's office, he casually remarked, "Brad, one of the clerks at the courthouse mentioned to me that a final accounting for the Betsy Satterly intestate proceedings is overdue, and the judge was looking for the filing of the document, so the matter can be closed. Was that the woman who got murdered last year, Brad? I remember reading about her in the Atlanta papers."

Brad looked up, and seemed to be focusing on Rod's question, which changed the subject from his review of deposition transcripts.

"Oh, yes. That was a sad case. The investigation by the Gordon County Sheriff's Office is still continuing, but I suspect that they're losing interest at this point. What a mystery that was."

Rod saw his opening, while appreciating his cleverness. "How was she killed, Brad?" he said, moving over and sitting on the chair in front of Brad's desk. If Brad was irritated over the interruption, he didn't show it, but seemed to enjoy the moment to tell a war story about an old case.

Brad continued, "It might have been something connected with the Cherokee community here in Calhoun. She was found dead in her barn behind the house. Shot two times, once in the chest, once in the head. Looked like a mob killing to the authorities at first, but then they found the trinkets."

Rod was surprised at the mention of the "mob" in this small Georgia city, but he let it pass not to sidetrack the direction of the conversation.

"The trinkets?" asked Rod, now seeming interested in the story.

"Well, not really trinkets. There was a spear with some hawk feathers on its end that was stuck in her chest when they found her. The medical examiner concluded from his investigation of the body that the spear was not the murder weapon, since he concluded she was dead when the spear entered her chest. Never knew how Dr. Clancy concluded that fact, but he is good on the forensics; that's why he's been elected eight straight times in the county. The detectives concluded that the spear might have been some ritualistic statement by the murderer or murderers. There have been all kinds of theories along those lines since Betsy was a descendant of a guy named Major Ridge, a large Cherokee landowner and chieftain here back in the 1830's."

"I've heard that name before, maybe at the local historical museum," said Rod.

"Major Ridge, known as 'Nunnehidhi', was one of the Cherokee Triumvirate, the group of three chieftains who governed the Cherokee Nation around here when there was a Nation in the east. Unfortunately, from the Cherokee

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standpoint, he was one of the signers of the controversial Treaty of New Echota of 1836, which ceded the remaining Cherokee inhabiting tribal lands in the southeastern United States to the United States. Unless the Cherokees had married a white settler, the Indians were moved to Oklahoma and the emigration was called the "Trail of Tears" because many died on the trip."

"How does that relate to Mrs. Satterly's murder?" asked Rod.

Brad closed the file on his desk, picked it up, and walked towards his corner file cabinet. While he walked, he turned to Rod, and said, "There was some talk around town, especially among the folks with Cherokee blood, that the killing was a revenge killing for Betsy's ancestor. Certain Cherokees assassinated Major Ridge, and there is some feeling that there is a Cherokee secret society looking for revenge after all these years. There have been some other mysterious deaths in the Cherokee community in the last twenty years, and some say the artifacts at the scene of the crimes were similar to the spear and feathers found in Betsy's chest."

"The criminal investigation came up with no suspects?" asked Rod.

"No, there is a certain amount of secrecy in the Cherokee community, especially among the old timers. There is so much feeling about that march to Oklahoma, even today, that most of the community might have supported the act of these people. But, then again, the murder could have been unrelated to the Cherokee community. Betsy lived alone since her husband died ten years ago, and out there on her farm, she could have been a target for robbery, and the murder might have just happened. It doesn't explain the spear in her chest, of course."

It appeared to Rod that Brad was about to leave the room. He did not want the conversation about Betsy Satterly to end so quickly. He still had some questions to ask.

"Brad, had you represented Mrs. Satterly before she was killed?"

Brad sat down in the chair near the door to his office after moving some books from it. Then he said, "I helped her on occasional matters. I had represented her husband before he died, too. She was a nice woman, very conservative, and always worrying about something since her husband died. As a matter of fact, she had been in to see me several months before she was murdered."

Now Rod was very interested in this last comment, but he didn't want to appear too eager for information, since he had no connection with the woman. Luckily, Brad seemed to be into the conversation now and turned around, walking back into the office.

“Was she concerned about anything which would lead to her murderer?” asked Rod, keeping the discussion going.

“Yes and no,” responded Brad. “This is all confidential client stuff, but I have told the sheriff’s office everything before, and you work here in the office. Let’s say this, Rod, she was troubled by several things. First, she had gotten a bad report from her doctor, and thought she might live for only a few months. Then she was looking for advice about something she called, ‘The Legacy’, but I never really knew what that was or what she meant. It was something to do with her Cherokee heritage, and that’s why the investigators were interested, but it never went anywhere. She was secretive, and I told her that I was her attorney, and anything she told me would be confidential. She was anxious, that’s for sure, but she told me little, and ended up having me check out some information about scientific experiments on aging for her. I got most of the information from the Internet.”

Rod knew this information now was hitting the sweet zone. “She could have done that herself.”

“Yes, of course,” said Brad, “but Betsy was an old timer in many ways, never accepted the Internet way of doing things. I’m not even sure she had a computer, and probably wouldn’t know how to use one, even at the public library. She did have a few other questions for me now that I think about it.”

“More questions?” asked Rod.

“Yes, she wanted to know how to bring someone to court and make them do things they didn’t want to do. It was pretty basic; I assumed she was talking about some form of injunction, but she never told me enough to give her any concrete advice. She seemed desperate in one sense, but afraid of something, and that seemed to tie her hands.”

“Did she have any close relatives here?” asked Rod, knowing from the court proceedings he had reviewed that there were two other sisters.

“Two sisters around here,” said Brad.

“Could the sisters give the investigators any helpful information?” asked Rod, trying to probe for more information about the sisters.

“Well, Mary Ann Gifford, up there on Rothran Road wasn’t much help I’m told, but she did say that her sisters sometimes talked about the ‘Legacy’ when they were together, but she knew nothing about it. Only thing she apparently confirmed to the investigators was that Betsy was very frantic about something several weeks before her death, and told her she was talking to several people about something ‘important’. The other sister, Claire Winnona was a widow also, and lived over in Resaca. After her husband died, almost twenty years ago

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now, she was sort of a female hermit. I tried to do a will for her at Betsy's request, but she never let me in the house. It was really a strange situation."

Rod saw Brad check his watch, so he knew the conversation was about over. He asked, "Did Claire Winnona provide the investigators any insights about Betsy?"

"They never had a chance to talk to her. She disappeared about a week after Betsy's murder. Haven't found her yet. There's been concern about her well-being, since a murder of one sister could lead to a possible murder of the other sister, I assume," said Brad, as he rose from his chair.

"Very interesting," said Rod, as Brad excused himself and left his office.

We need to find Claire Winnona, if she is still alive, thought Rod. And I must report to Larman this new information, though I have no direction at this point.

Fortuitously, Larman arranged for a discrete luncheon meeting at the Cathedral Restaurant, just off the main commercial street in downtown Calhoun. Perhaps Larman was giving up on the idea of separate operations by the three attorneys, thought Rod. Now it was just a friendship among a wandering and aging writer, a cub reporter, and a young paralegal. That's possible, mused Rod.

After the three had ordered lunch, Rod related his new information gathered from the courthouse and his discussion with Brad Soppenburg.

Mixie, who was looking to impress her boss, said to Larman, "Larman, do you think we should talk to the lead detective who is handling the Satterly murder investigation?"

Larman didn't respond immediately but seemed to be watching the waitress across the room. After a moment of silence, Larman turned to Mixie and said, "No, we need some further cover before we start talking to the authorities. How are we going to explain our interest in this investigation without totally blowing our cover here?"

"Could we hire a local private investigator to track down the sister, Claire Winnona?" asked Rod.

Larman pulled out his pipe which Rod had never seen him smoke back in the New York office.

"Well, hiring someone down here certainly is a possibility," he said, "but my conversations with our client, Professor Hippa, did give me substantial background, which he conveyed from his conversations with Betsy Satterly. He learned that she was one of five individual descendants of this small and secret Cherokee group that held this secret for the preparation of gohida ama. These five individuals may be the only survivors who possess the collective ability to produce the complete formula, and they all live in the Calhoun, Georgia area.

They each hold the secret identity of two steps of the formula, but individually, they don't know the other three steps. Each of the five inherited the secrets of their ancestor, but each took a blood oath to keep their knowledge as to the two ingredients secret until...."

Mixie then got into the conversation. "Larman, you were about to tell us when the secret steps would be released by the five people holding the steps to the formula?"

"Probably never, Mixie. According to the oral history and legend, it would require a rare eclipse with Saturn, which is so remote, it would seem an extremely remote possibility," answered Larman.

Rod then interjected, "But Larman, how does all of this involve us, and what legal activity would we do here?"

Larman nodded, and after looking at each of the associates, continued, "The legal part would come at the end. The more immediate challenge will be to find out the complete formula and the required ingredients with Professor Hippa's help."

"And I have learned about Mrs. Satterly's unfortunate murder, said Rod. "That certainly is troubling to me and Mixie."

"An important fact, though," interjected Mixie.

Rod thought for several seconds, and asked, "Are you suggesting she was killed by someone looking for the formula or by someone in this small group of people to prevent her from saying anything further to Professor Hippa?"

"Unclear at this point, Rod. Either is a possibility. The professor does not trust the police here, and wants us to assimilate into the community for a few weeks to try to determine who else knows the real-life details of this Cherokee secret."

"But why should the professor want young law firm associates to do this?" asked Mixie, trying to digest all of the information flowing from Larman.

"Professor Hippa didn't want the risk of police involvement. He felt the secret nature of the matter was too imperative. He wanted several highly intelligent individuals, with a background in the elements of intellectual property, to do an investigation. Obviously, the professor proposed that the size of the group be as small as possible, with loyalty only to him. He is trying to keep it a private matter since I'm sure he has the pecuniary interest in keeping any patent rights solely with his group."

Mixie had not eaten much of her sandwich. She'd been thinking during the last conversation and looked up at Larman. "I have an idea. Let me suggest to the editor of my paper that I do an article on the unsolved murder of Betsy Satterly."

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Rod then quipped, "Well, Larman, I'm sure that this story has been in the local newspapers for months. Why would the newspaper want to run another story? That request would make the editor more than a little suspicious, I would imagine."

Mixie scowled at Rod, then turned to Larman.

Larman seemed to stare across the room, perhaps at the waitress again. Then he said, "Yes, I like that idea, Mixie. It might just stir up some more information for us, and I think we're at a dead-end at this moment."

Mixie nodded, and turned briefly to smirk at Rod, who was now looking at the waitress, and avoiding her stare.

"I would be careful though, Mixie. One sister has been murdered, and one sister is missing, and has been for a number of months. She may be dead. Whoever committed the murder probably is local and may not appreciate any further investigation of the story. You may be throwing yourself into a sphere of danger, real danger," said Larman.

A blank stare appeared on Mixie's face. She hadn't evaluated that aspect fully, as she was anxious to impress Larman with her ingenuity. Even Rod felt concern. He wanted to best Mixie's efforts to impress Larman, but he certainly didn't wish her any harm.

"Perhaps I could go with her when she investigates the story," volunteered Rod.

Mixie quickly looked over at Rod, not appreciating his apparent gallantry, and appearing irked, at least outwardly. "Not necessary, Larman. I can handle this alone," she retorted.

There was silence among the three at the table for several seconds. It was unclear whether Mixie was looking for disagreement from Larman to her last statement, but he gave no indication of such.

Larman said, "O.K. Mixie. See what you can find out. If you have any problem with your editor buying this idea, let me know. I have ways to change his mind."

Rod and Mixie looked at each other, not knowing exactly what Larman meant.

Larman rose from his seat, placed his Australian hat on his head, picked up his walking stick, and started to leave the restaurant. He certainly had worked on his image as a wandering writer. The two associates rose and followed him across the restaurant to the exit.

"Keep your cell phone handy, Mixie. I'd hate to have the firm lose such a promising associate."

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Larman appeared to be smiling, but Rod wasn't sure that the smile didn't hide considerable concern for Mixie's safety. Even Mixie seemed to be mulling over second thoughts about her idea. And second thoughts certainly were in order.

###

Chapter Three

Exploring Calhoun

Mixie never had second thoughts over whether she could convince her editor, George Hasbrouck, to let her do the investigatory story of the Satterly murder. George was an old reporter who had health issues, leading him to assume the editorship of the Calhoun *Republican*, and to eventually buy out the owner with a long-term loan. He wasn't interested in making waves, but he certainly would consider any local story. Further, Mixie had the charm to make any seventy-year-old editor see something her way. She did have to agree to cover the Flower Show the next week, and write a few obituaries, but that still freed her time for her new investigatory project.

After meeting with Detective Clinton, and Coroner Godfrey, she reviewed the old issues of the newspapers, those pertinent to the Satterly story. She learned from Detective Clinton that the FBI had actually been involved in the investigation in the early stages, but the agency's resources had been re-assigned other places in recent months. Mixie was becoming the local authority on the murder and its background she thought, and conveyed her opinion to Larman and Rod when they dined on Friday night.

"I'm ready to write the first installment of my story," she said with a grin, looking at Rod across the table.

"Have you learned anything which helps us?" Rod asked.

"I don't think so," she responded, "but I'm going to emphasize the mystery of her sister Claire Winnona's disappearance in my first story. That might scare some information out of the woodwork."

"I talked to Professor Hippa last night," interjected Larman. "He wanted to emphasize that there could be danger in this investigation. Apparently, Betsy Satterly had mentioned a secret Cherokee society that had been operating in the Calhoun area for a long period of time. It might have been connected with the Trail of Tears."

"Yes, that was the same information that Brad Soppenburg gave me back at the office," said Rod.

"Well, I'm staying close to home base, so don't worry about me," said Mixie, confidently. "The first article in the Satterly investigatory series comes out

tomorrow morning in the paper, so give me your review at dinner tomorrow night.”

The reviews the next night were good, and Larman and Rod were actually quite impressed over the detail of the article. It raised a number of questions regarding the investigation and stirred up the mystery of the missing sister. Rod wondered if the references to a secret Cherokee brotherhood in the article might agitate more community interest than Mixie was anticipating.

While Mixie worked on her next installment of the Satterly investigation piece, Rod was busy doing some memoranda of law, since his temporary employers found out that he could research and write pretty well for a new paralegal. The pace was not so formidable, however, that Rod could not play detective himself regarding the Satterly issues. He had a perceived breakthrough when he discovered, through a friend of Brad Soppenburg, the granddaughter of Betsy Satterly. She was a young woman by the name of Gerri Delmore, in her middle twenties with a nice figure and a pixie haircut. Gerri worked as a bookkeeper and sales girl in the local gift shop and art store. Though Rod had no indication that Gerri knew more information about her grandmother’s murder, he became an art critic, if amateur, and hung around the shop where Gerri worked.

“Are you the local art expert?” Rod asked as he held several small pieces of Indian pottery at the Satterly shop.

“Oh, no sir, my father is the knowledgeable one. I’m more the administrative one, I guess,” said Gerri.

“Oh, that’s nice,” answered Rod. He now realized that he was the awkward one in the conversation. He laughed and placed the pottery back on the shelf.

“Well, no, I don’t mean that exactly. That sounded sort of strange,” he said.

Gerri tilted her head. Is she flirting with me? wondered Rod.

“I’ve seen you around town, haven’t I?” said Gerri. “Are you new to the city?”

“Why I think we were both at the *Gilleon Restaurant* yesterday evening. I would never forget your smiling face,” said Rod.

“Yes, perhaps that was it,” responded Gerri.

“You were sitting with several boys, they were pretty loud, I remember that,” said Rod. He now started to feel more at ease.

“Yes, I have several friends; actually quite a few friends here in town,” she said.

“I assume they’re mostly boys, or should I say men,” said Rod. He now was sporting his biggest smile.

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“A lot of them are men. I always enjoy male company. Though you might have been right with your first description, that of boys, and perhaps immature boys,” said Gerri. She now seemed very relaxed.

“Was the woman I saw you with, your wife?” asked Gerri. “She is very pretty.”

“Oh no,” said Rod. “She’s only a relatively new acquaintance of mine who I met recently. She is quite intellectual.”

Rod rumped his forehead. He wasn’t sure why he added that fact.

“If you tell me your name and a little bit about yourself, I’ll give you a great suggestion,” said Gerri. She bounded around the counter and stood next to the cash register.

Rod spotted the soft drink cooler against the wall. “What if I buy you a soft drink and then we can exchange stories, or I mean biographies.”

Rod felt a little guilty since most of his story was fictional, but it clearly broke the ice.

“Well, Gerri, I’ll let you get back to work, but let’s meet on Saturday at this Harvest Fest you mentioned, and you can show me a little more of the city.”

“I think that might work,” said Gerri. She smiled, and then walked into the back room.

Rod felt somewhat guilty about his fabrications and motivations, but he realized he was actually quite drawn to Gerri. Since he arranged to meet Gerri at the Harvest Fest, he also met three other men, all of whom seemed to think that Gerri was his date. The only awkward moment came when two of them ran into Mixie, who was walking with Larman. Mixie didn’t like surprises and changes in her environment, thought Rod, and she was somewhat cold to Gerri at first. After a few minutes, however, the four of them seemed like old friends.

Of course, Mixie was not a wallflower, by any means. The local young men, and some of the older men, were ready to meet Mixie, and welcome the new cub reporter to town. And she was sort of a celebrity now, with her investigative articles appearing weekly in the city newspaper. She seemed to enjoy the attention, but Rod could detect when she used her guile to get what she needed, and he knew his abilities of investigation probably were dwarfed in comparison.

In any event, Rod and Mixie followed their own paths of investigation and community involvement over the next several weeks. Rod had to marvel at the detail of Mixie’s reporting, and the stories were getting substantial attention around town. He wasn’t making much progress on his end, however; but Gerri, who apparently knew little about her grandmother’s murder or the Cherokee brotherhood, was becoming a regular companion.

And then there was Larman. He was integrating into the local community society as the poet and author, being too proud to advertise any of his former publications. He did read poetry for the ladies at the Ice Cream Social, however, and sat in the park off the main street and played chess with the retirees several times a week. Rod wondered how his firm's senior partner could adapt to this lifestyle after the bedlam in New York City, but the old guy seemed to be enjoying it. Rod surmised that having this big earner and titan of the firm sitting around Calhoun, Georgia was costing the firm a few bucks, but apparently the decision at the highest level had been made and the determination was that it was worth it. If this quest was successful, the legal fees to the firm would be incredible, thought Rod, feeling a little pressure as he ate ice cream with Gerri along the street. But then again, he had heard from Brad Soppenburg back in the office that many of the old timers in the park were from the Cherokee community, and maybe Larman was getting some good information.

It had been a fun weekend for Rod. Much better than the library walls he endured most weekends back in New York. He was walking back to the office after leaving Gerri when Mixie ran down the sidewalk to meet up with him. She was carrying the backpack she got recently and was somewhat winded from the short sprint.

"Roddy, can I talk to you?" she said with a smile.

He recognized the warning sign immediately. "Roddy, is it? It must be time for me to duck," he said with a chuckle. She feigned irritation.

"No listen Rod, I do have a favor to ask. And I'm sure that Larman would approve."

"A favor?" asked Rod. He now stared at her, appreciating the mock pout that drove the boys crazy back in New York. Rod always found Mixie extremely attractive. He was a red-blooded male in every sense, and that feeling certainly couldn't be depressed. But there was always the annoyance factor with Mixie, being an invisible barrier to true romance. Of course, she only toyed with him in New York, always describing her interest in the older and more experienced attorneys. She always related her outings with some of the young investment bankers from Westchester when the associates gathered for lunch at the firm cafeteria in New York. Rod always listened, but feigned disinterest.

He looked at Mixie again and felt she had changed somewhat since he was showing interest in Gerri. Her comments were not as sharp to him, nor did she maintain the same haughty exterior in his presence. She was not the girl next door, that was for sure, but she appeared to be reaching out for him more these last few weeks.

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“What can I do for you, cub reporter?” he finally asked, as she glanced at him, looking for a response.

“Roddy, I have a good lead from an anonymous tip regarding the Satterly murder,” she said.

She looked at Rod again, without continuing.

“Why would you share this news with me, and jeopardize your ability to score a lone touchdown with Larman? Am I missing something?”

He immediately felt somewhat embarrassed with his negative response. Mixie was actually being very friendly, and maybe she was trying to share the wealth.

Mixie opened her blue eyes wide and stared at Rod. “Rod, please don’t be a nerd. I want to have your company on this venture, and perhaps I’m a little scared to do it alone.”

Rod folded his arms, and merely smiled at Mixie.

“O.K.,” she said, now appearing to get truly upset. “I’ll do this alone.”

He waited a few more seconds. “Don’t be silly my blond bomber, of course I will help you.”

Mixie touched his arm. “You seriously will come with me, right?”

“Yes, now give me some details. I need to get back to the office for a two o’clock deposition,” he responded.

Mixie moved closer to him, and said in a low voice, “I got a telephone call just before lunch from Mary Ann Gifford, who is the other sister.”

“Other sister? You mean the sister of Betsy Satterly who hasn’t disappeared?” responded Rod. “I didn’t think she was talking to anyone about her sister’s death, except maybe reluctantly to the police investigators. Why did she call you?”

“She has read my weekly articles about her sister’s murder, and seems to think I am an alternative to the detectives downtown. She doesn’t like the authorities for some reason. But she seems very nervous about something, Rod. She says she can give me some information if I keep the source anonymous, and if I can meet her at her home without any fanfare or media present.”

“But Mixie, you are the media.”

Mixie disregarded the attempt at humor.

She continued her reporting of the telephone call from Mary Ann Gifford. “She told me we needed to meet tonight at nine. Said it had to be tonight. She didn’t sound well, even for an elderly lady. Mrs. Gifford told me we could help each other, but said nothing else but the combination to the front gate of her house. I told her a press associate would be coming with me, as company policy for nighttime visits by female reporters. She appreciated that policy and said she would be looking for us at nine.”

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“Assumptions about my presence were made, I see,” responded Rod.

Mixie gave her devastating pout and special look. “I knew you wouldn’t let me down,” she said.

“Well, let’s get it done. I’ll cancel my softball game with the law office team tonight,” Rod said with mock disappointment. “Is there anything else I need to know about this meeting this evening?”

“Only that Mrs. Gifford said that the house would be dark when we arrived, and not to let that deter us,” Mixie said, looking down the street.

“Oh,” said Rod. “Anything else?”

“She said we might want to bring a hand gun, but I think she was only kidding.”

With that hanging comment, Mixie started walking down the sidewalk toward her office. “See you at 7:30 at my condo. You can drive, can’t you?”

“I don’t own a gun,” Rod shouted to Mixie as she moved away. He looked around with a momentary embarrassment, wondering if a bystander would understand.

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Chapter Four

Visit with the Sister

Rod did call Larman to see if he wanted to attend the meeting that night with Mary Ann Gifford. He told him about the comments from Mixie about her phone call with Mary Ann, to which Larman expressed his concerns for the safety of the two associates, but their senior partner didn't seem anxious to add a third visitor to the sister's house.

Larman responded, "If Mrs. Gifford is looking for two visitors and I showed, she probably would shoot me." He gave out a loud chuckle, appreciating his own humor. "Furthermore," Larman added, "I'm scheduled to be the featured speaker at the Lion's Club tonight. I'll be speaking on Spanish Renaissance poetry. Sorry you'll miss it, son."

Rod wasn't sure why Larman called him son from time to time, but it was usually when he was establishing the partner-associate relationship with him.

Rod said nothing for a moment, realizing this mission was his baby, and he would get no mentoring from Larman. He also felt the weight of responsibility for Mixie's safety.

Seven thirty came faster than usual that night for Rod. He had no access to a gun, but was able to buy a hunting knife from Carter's Army and Navy Store just to the east of downtown. He also brought two cell phones he had collected, and a first aid kit, but that seemed stupid to him now. And there were the two heavy flashlights. If need be, he could use those heavy tools as a weapon, if hand-to-hand combat was necessary. As he knocked on the door to Mixie's condo, he chuckled again at his amateurish approach to this assignment. His thoughts turned to the reasons for Mary Ann Gifford's sudden and urgent demand for a meeting with a local cub reporter.

Mixie bounced down the steps from the second floor of the condominium building with pad in hand, and a flashlight of her own in the other hand. She wore a raincoat for some reason, which Rod thought strange, since no rain was predicted for the evening.

"Let's get this over with," she said looking at Rod, and added a little mock expression of fear. The two got into Rod's black Mercury, and headed for Rothran Road, north of the city.

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They rode in silence for several miles over the hills before Rod turned to Mixie and said, "So, how are we going to handle this interview? Are you doing the talking?"

Mixie was looking around the side windows, but without looking directly at Rod, she said, "From what I heard on the phone from Mrs. Gifford, I assume she'll tell us what's on her mind, and we'll listen. We'll just have to play it by ear. I just hope she is alive when we get there."

"Alive? Come on Mixie, let's not get too dramatic."

Mixie said, "She sounded pretty scared on the phone. She was adamant that she wasn't calling the cops."

Rod said, "She might have..."

Mixie interrupted Rod in mid-sentence. "There is someone following us. There is a truck with big wheels that has been behind us for the last ten miles. It stays a safe distance back, regardless of what you do, Rod."

"Don't let your imagination get the better of you. There's a lot of traffic out tonight. There was a white car behind us for a while, too. Doesn't mean we're being tailed," he said. He didn't have a convincing tone in his voice.

"Do you think it's too late to fly back to New York tonight?" he asked with a smile, but Mixie was staring out the side window into the darkness and didn't answer.

Rod's GPS system was old and worked when it wanted to turn on. Fortunately, tonight it was illuminating the route, and Rod saw the Rothran Road street sign reflecting from his headlights. It was a gravel road, and it was desolate, with a few gates appearing between the trees and underbrush along the road. There were some distant lights down the driveways, but Rod couldn't see any actual houses in the darkness. His only hope of finding this place, he thought, was to be lucky enough to find a house number or name on an infrequent sign next to a driveway. He slowed the car down and turned off the GPS unit so his face was in darkness. In his rearview mirror he saw some distant light far down the roadway behind him.

Mixie seemed to be freaking out. "Hang in there," said Rod, smiling at her. "This will be quick, once we find this place," he said to reassure her. It was not like finding the right sorority house during rush week, he thought to himself.

"There's a sign...see it under that tree by the driveway," shouted Mixie as she stared straight ahead.

Rod pulled the car up to the driveway and let the headlights shine on the small wooden sign. It read, "Beware of Dogs". He also noticed some rain drops on his windshield. Rain, how could it rain? It wasn't predicted tonight. And Mixie has a raincoat on. That's truly uncanny, he mused. He started the car and

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moved slowly ahead and looked again at his rearview mirror. Those lights behind him seemed to be closer, he thought, but said nothing to Mixie.

A deer dashed in front of the car, and Mixie screamed. Rod slammed on the brakes, but then realized it probably wasn't necessary, the deer was well in front of him. The car remained stopped in the road for a moment, and neither driver nor passenger said a word. Then Rod looked around, and started the car moving again, now traveling over what appeared to be sand. Then Mixie called out, "There is a larger sign hanging on the post by that steel gate. I think it says 'Gifford' on it, and then something under it."

Rob was squinting to see the rest of the sign through the rain, which now had increased in intensity. "Yes, the rest of it is rather unfriendly," he said. "It reads 'Keep Out, Intruders will be shot'."

"Mixie, I hope we get a big bonus this year from the firm's Associates' Committee," said Rod, as he opened his door, pulled out the large flashlight, and headed for the gate. He glanced back at the headlights down the road and noticed that they had stopped. He went to the gate, and holding the light on the combination lock, Rod worked the numbers he had received from Mixie. Click, the lock opened, and Rod gave out a breath he was holding. He pushed the heavy gate inward and returned to the car. Mixie was sitting in the passenger seat, but she had turned, and watched the lights sitting about a thousand feet behind them in the road. The lights didn't seem to be moving.

"Let's go," she said. "Next time I'll make sure my boyfriend is a member of the NRA."

"Boyfriend?" said Rod, softly to himself. Then he pressed the gas pedal, and the two young attorneys headed down the gravel driveway through two large hedgerows. From time to time, they could see the reflective eyes of some animal or another, but they saw no house lights ahead, just as Mary Ann Gifford had warned. In the background they heard some barking dogs, but they seemed to be howling from a distant property.

"Do we go to the front door or the back door?" asked Rod.

"She didn't say," answered Mixie, with outright terror appearing on her face, as Rod flashed his light back at her face.

Rod walked to the front door of the modest house and some ornaments on the door reflected his flashlight's beam of illumination. It was a wooden structure, but appeared to be supported by cinder blocks in the corners, and under the front door. It was a two-story house, with several boarded windows upstairs, and a chimney which appeared somewhat destroyed from missing bricks. The paint on the wood siding needed replenishing badly. That was clear even at night, even as examined with a flashlight.

Rod grabbed the handle to the door for the front screen porch that blocked the door to the dwelling. He attempted to turn it, but it was locked. He knocked heavily several times on the side of the porch outer boards, and called out, "Mrs. Gifford, are you home?"

No answer. Mixie held Rod's arm and searched around the dark yard. Then she jumped back. "What's that?" she whispered.

Rod turned and looked back. He had heard it, too. There was a clanging noise, perhaps the gate closing. "Maybe there are more guests here than only us," he said without looking at Mixie's face again. He could hear her give out a low gasp, or was it a sob? In any event, this was the time to bluff bravery, even if the real thing might be non-existent in his mind.

"I'm going around back and check any doors there. Mixie, do you want to stay here?" he said.

"Are you crazy?" said Mixie, and the two of them walked slowly around the bushes and the stones at the side of the house, keeping the flashlight riveted ahead.

"Over here Miss!"

Rod did not know his nervous system could be separated from his body. His jump was coordinated with Mixie's shriek, sending both of them falling to the right. Rod instinctively raised the flashlight as he detected movement in behind the hedge at the side of the house. Then he lowered the light, and saw the face of an elderly woman, holding a shotgun.

"Mrs. Gifford, I hope," he said, taking a step back.

The woman did not answer but turned to Mixie. "Thank you for coming, miss. I need to talk to you right away. Some strange things have been happening around here lately."

The three of them heard a sound like a car door closing some distance away.

"Come inside," Mary Ann Gifford said. "We can go in the kitchen and talk. And bring your friend with you."

The woman turned on a small light, which helped illuminate the outdated kitchen, but left everything rather dim. Rod looked around, wondering if the stove still used logs, and the refrigerator was really an icebox only. Mixie and Rod pulled out the white wooden chairs from the kitchen table, and sat down, resting their arms on the red and white checkerboard tablecloth.

The woman, who both Rod and Mixie assumed was Mary Ann Gifford, pulled out a packet of materials from behind the sink, and brought it to the table, where she sat down across from the two attorneys.

Other than the crickets, the night seemed especially quiet, as Rod peered out the window. Mixie, now somewhat composed, turned to the woman, and said,

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“Ma’am, I assume you are Mary Ann Gifford, and I understand you have some information for us. Mr. Smith, here, is my assistant. You can speak freely to us, and we will maintain a confidential relationship.”

Rod kept looking out the kitchen window behind the woman, as he thought he detected a light of some sort, probably a flashlight. His ears were strained, and he was on alert, missing the introduction by Mixie to Mary Ann Gifford. He even missed her characterization of his assistant status, which surprised her.

“Yes...yes. I need to talk to someone, and I won’t go to the authorities. The Cherokee Brotherhood would not permit that. I believe people are watching the house, but I’m afraid to leave. I’m afraid they will come for me, just like they did to Betsy.”

“Who are they?” asked Mixie.

“I’m not sure,” replied Mrs. Gifford, but I know it might be that secret Cherokee group that survives in this area. They have haunted my sister and scared my sister Claire to escape the area and stay in hiding for the last six months. It’s unfair. They are terrorizing me, and I’m not one of the Unua.”

“Pardon me,” interjected Rod, now coming into the conversation.

Mrs. Gifford paused, looking at Rod for a moment. She appeared to wonder if it was wise to tell a story, then she turned to Mixie, and started talking.

“Our ancestors came down through a Cherokee Indian leader named Nunnehidihi, and later Ganundalegi. He married a white woman named Susannah Wickett, and owned slaves and lots of land in this area. Since he signed the Treaty of New Echota back in the 1830’s, the family has been hated by many Cherokee families.”

“He was called Major Ridge by the white men,” Mrs. Gifford continued, but his real achievement, unknown generally to the historians, was that he was named the keeper of a tribal secret with momentous implications.”

Rod had heard most of this story from Brad Soppenburg in his law office, but this last part perked his attention. Mixie stared at Mrs. Gifford, as she continued her story.

The old woman rose from her chair, walked over to the window and looked out. Then she returned and resumed her story. “Legend has it that the Cherokee Nation has passed down a five-step formula for mixing a potion called gohida ama which would stop the aging process, possibly reverse it. In order to know the formula and produce gohida ama, one would need to have all five steps of the formula, understand them, and find the substances that are the ingredients. In order to preserve this secret of this ‘Fountain of Youth’, our forefathers selected five families to hold part of the five steps, and pass them from generation to generation, but keeping them secret at all costs. The best way to

do that, according to our ancestors' thinking, was to keep several of the steps separate with a different family tree, so all five pieces would need to be disclosed at once, or at least consecutively. Each selected family and its designated family member would know only one other designated holder of the secret steps and the information about that step, in case of a sudden death of the other holder. Each of the holders was called a 'Unua'."

Rod and Mixie stayed fixated on the face of Mrs. Gifford. Though it was the basic story they had heard from Larman, it was clear that this woman might have a personal connection to the five Unua.

Then Mixie asked, "You said it was unfair before. What did you mean?"

Mrs. Gifford continued, "It's unfair that I'm terrorized by these secret Cherokee vigilantes, when I'm not a holder of any of the secret steps for the making of gohida ama. My father selected my sister Betsy to hold one of the secret steps, and my other sister Claire to hold the other step. It was rare that one family would hold two of the steps for the formula to make gohida ama, but intra-marriage between several Cherokee descendants caused the situation to exist. Now I believe some individuals are trying to kill me, perhaps to prevent my disclosure of the formula."

Rod looked back from the window towards Mrs. Gifford. "I thought you said you were the sister who had no such information."

"No direct information," Mrs. Gifford said, staring back at him.

She continued, "I do know about the code, and I do know where my sister Claire has been hiding."

"The code?" asked Rod, looking back at Mrs. Gifford.

Mrs. Gifford stopped and appeared to be listening to a noise she just detected. She began crying, "It's so unfair, they're here to get me, and I've done nothing."

Rod got up from his seat, and walked to the back door of the house which was also the door to the kitchen. He had his flashlight in hand, and walked to the backyard, but seeing nothing, he returned and sat down.

"Tell us what more you know, and we can help you get to safety," said Rod, playing the protector again.

"You asked about the code," Mrs. Gifford said. "The Cherokee Brotherhood, let me call them that for want of a better word, communicate in a code based on the ancient Cherokee language and a manipulation of the language that only a very few intimates understand and have access to. In other words, most Cherokee descendants have no clue to decipher the code when it is sent. Sometimes they print the code in the classified section of your newspaper, miss, and that's how they communicate. They must know the secrets

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of the gohida ama. There are a few of the Brotherhood still around who want to make the formula for gohida ama disappear forever, since they believe its powers are only bad for the Cherokee.”

At that moment Mixie saw a flash of motion out of the corner of her eye. She let out a scream, and both Rod and Mrs. Gifford bolted from their chairs and hit the floor. A shot rang out, smashing the kitchen window, and imbedding something into the cabinet above the stove.

“Separate and stay low,” yelled Rod.

The three stayed on the floor, and Mrs. Gifford doused the light in the room. As she was moving to the side, Rod saw her shotgun leaning against the wall by the door, and he grabbed it, but wasn’t sure if it was loaded. He moved along the floor to the back door, carrying the over and under shotgun in one hand and pulling out his hunting knife he had hidden in his pants under his shirt. This wasn’t bravery, he thought, it was survival, man’s basic instinct. Rod needed to confront this shooter. He dashed out the partially open door, and rolled down into the darkness, expecting at any time to feel the pain of a bullet.

Two more shots rang out, and Rod could see part of the cinderblock corner give off dust, and he could hear a ricocheting bullet whiz by his head. He detected motion in the bushes along the driveway, and pulled up the shotgun and squeezed the trigger, wondering what would happen. The gun exploded, and the recoil shot against the inexperienced arm of the shooter. There was a shell in there, after all, Rod realized.

Now he wished he still had that large flashlight which he had carried into the house, but he knew it was still on the table. Behind his car, he saw a man with a ski cap signaling with his arm, as the hand movement caught Rod’s heightened perception. Rod slid along the bush line until he could see the other side of the car, and suddenly a flash of light came from the direction of the other man. Rod fired again. Yes, there was another shell in the shotgun. He heard a yelp, and then rustling of the bushes behind the car and on the other side of the driveway. There were at least two people, both running out toward the street side of the driveway.

Rod checked himself, and luckily found no blood. He ran back into the kitchen and found Mrs. Gifford under the table shaking, and Mixie crying in the corner next to the stove.

“We need to get out of here, right now,” screamed Rod, and pulled Mrs. Gifford’s hand to get her up from the floor. “And Mrs. Gifford, you need to come with us, without delay.”

Mixie ran over to Rod, hugging him, but crying profusely. It was nice being a hero, he thought, but it was even nicer to live to enjoy it.

“Do you have any more shells for this gun?” asked Rod as the three gathered their things and headed for the back door.

Mrs. Gifford did not respond but opened a cabinet near the door and reached into a box, pulling out a handful of shotgun shells. She dropped them in her apron pocket and picked up a duffel bag on the floor. “Let’s get out of here,” she said.

The two women and Rod got into his black Mercury, with Mrs. Gifford in the back seat. Rod handed the shotgun back to her and turned the key and hit the gas. He had only one intention. That was to steer the car straight down the driveway toward the front gate, hoping that the entrance was clear for their exit. Rod saw the gate was still open, and he floored the gas, skidding around the corner to the gravel road. At that point he drove with a mission. That was to survive for another day.

Mixie was given the assignment of spotter, to see if any cars were following them. Mrs. Gifford had the back window open and the shotgun reloaded. She was the artillery. After covering several miles at about eighty miles per hour on the straight a ways, Rod pulled the car into a local hamburger spot and parked in a lighted area. All of the riders took a deep breath, and no one spoke for a few seconds. Then Mrs. Gifford started to talk again.

“The other problem I have is the safety of my baby sister Claire. I think these people are trying to find her, and if they do, I think they’ll harm her to nullify her secrets. Though my murdered sister Betsy had Claire’s identity and formula information as a backup in case of Betsy’s death, Claire has the identity and information for one of the other Unua as a backup in case of his or her death. I have no idea who any of these other Unua are, but Claire is a key to finding the formula for gohida ama intact. That’s why she’s in so much danger.”

Rod had forgotten that he had his old cell phone in his pants. Hopefully, it is in one piece, he thought. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled it out; he placed a call with his quick call feature. He looked at the reflection in the car window and saw Mixie’s face, and he could tell she was still shaking. I need to get her home, he thought.

Rod waited until there was an answer to his call. Without identifying himself or the person being called, he said into the phone, “We need your help. We have Mrs. Gifford with us. Someone tried to kill Mrs. Gifford, and probably both of us. We need to get her to a safe location.”

Rod listened to the response, then he added, “We’ll bring her there immediately, and let you take over at that point.” Rod turned back to Mrs. Gifford, and said, “We have a friend with connections. We will take you to him,

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and he will get you out of this area to a safe location, probably with a body guard.”

Mrs. Gifford nodded, and then spoke, looking at Mixie. “Thank you. I don’t know you, but I trust you. I would have been a body lying on the kitchen floor if you hadn’t come tonight.”

With that, she reached into her apron pocket where the shells were gathered, but pulled out a piece of paper. She handed it to Rod, and he looked at it, reading a name, address, and telephone number.

Mrs. Gifford looked at him and touched his shoulder from the back seat.

She said slowly, “Mixie’s friend, here is my sister’s location. Never let this address get out of your possession. Once you know it, please destroy the note. You should talk to her. She will have some answers for you. But you must protect her. Do not let them get to her.”

Now this is a breakthrough, thought Rod, as he headed toward a rendezvous with Larman, who was alerted to the rendezvous point by Rod’s cell phone call. After driving for about ten minutes, Rod pulled into a truck stop and stopped the car along the side of a lighted building where two men were standing. Mrs. Gifford followed Rod and Mixie out of the car. Rod introduced the old gentlemen with an Australian hat, and Larman introduced a middle-aged man in a brown tweed jacket and brimmed hat.

Larman said to Mrs. Gifford, “Ms. Gifford, this is Milliard Hudson. He works for a well-respected security firm in Atlanta. He and Miss Melland, sitting back in that car at the curb, will take you to a secure spot for the foreseeable future so as to avoid another evening like this.”

Mary Ann didn’t resist, but followed Hudson to his car, and the three sped off.

“What an incredible night,” said Rod, looking over at Mixie. She was quiet now, but had stopped trembling. “I don’t think we’re in any more danger tonight, Larman. Thank you for your help with Mrs. Gifford. I think she’s the one they’re after.”

Rod didn’t hand the note with Claire’s address to Larman. He wasn’t sure why, but he thought he would wait until the morning to pass on that information.

“O.K. then,” said Larman, as he got into his car and sped away.

Mixie finally looked up, and said, “Rod, I can’t possibly go back and stay in my condo tonight. No, not after this!”

Rod said nothing, but headed for his car.

Mixie seemed perplexed. She said. “Roddy, did you hear me?”

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Rod looked up, smiling. “Of course, I heard you. I was just waiting for you to call me Roddy. And by the way, if you stay with me, you’ll be in the other bedroom. I don’t mix pleasure with business.”

She gave him the pout. “You’re the boss,” she responded, getting into his car.

Whoa, what a night it was, he thought. Escaped being killed, saved an old lady, and had the luscious Miss Mixie begging for my bedroom. Could life be better?

Then he didn’t want to celebrate too early. The mystery had not been solved. There was always another day he could be killed, and Mixie may change her mind next time.

The future was still a wild card.

Rod knew that for sure. And again, he was right.

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Chapter Five

Investigation

Mixie and Rod met Larman for breakfast the next morning at Larman's bed and breakfast just west of the city. Larman had planned to get an apartment, since everyone knew this project would take some time, but he liked the B&B, so that's where he stayed.

The three attorneys completed the early morning small talk, and then Rod handed Larman the note that Mary Ann Gifford had handed him the night before. Rod was so exhausted after the night's activities that he never opened the note to read what he perceived to be the location of the third sister, Claire Winnona. Larman read the address out loud:

"Claire Winnona, 4433 Lakemont Hills Drive, Masontown, PA. 504-665-8855."

Call and leave message and use the phrase: 'Big Clown'
Please keep this address secure."

After studying the note further, Larman said, "I'm surprised that Mrs. Gifford gave this to us. You two must have given her enough confidence that she doesn't feel we'll hurt her sister. I'm sure there are other people looking for Claire Winnona, and we need to make sure they don't follow us."

"Larman, are you going to Pennsylvania and talk to this woman?" Mixie asked.

The proprietor of the B&B walked out on the patio to bring the pancakes, which were the early meal of the day. Larman greeted her, and the Rod and Mixie looked at each other, wondering why Larman was so jovial today.

When Mrs. Wincock, the proprietor, left, Larman answered the prior question. "I think the two of you might be a better choice. Something interesting has come up around here."

Rod and Mixie looked at each other again, somewhat surprised by Larman's response.

Rod said, "Larman, Claire Winnona is a critical person for our investigation here. We know she is one of the Unua and holds two of the steps of the formula for making the gohida ama. Why would you send us?"

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Larman smiled and said, “Oh, I don’t underestimate her importance. Professor Hippa has told me that during his meeting with Betsy Satterly she mentioned that she had passed her two steps to the formula to her sister Claire, though one of the steps was the backup for Claire’s piece.”

“Wow, that is important,” said Mixie.

Larman continued his answer, “No, I have thought about the next step here for several days now, and I think it makes more sense if the two of you visit Claire Winnona. It would be less threatening to her. If we play our cards right, I think Claire will cooperate with us, especially since her sister Mrs. Gifford is now in our protective custody and will call her sister for us.”

The three attorneys held their conversation momentarily while Mrs. Wincock returned with refills for their coffee, and then Mixie broke the silence, and asked, “Larman, what did you mean before when you said, ‘something interesting’ had come up here?”

Larman seemed to ignore her question, apparently to extend the suspense. Mixie was frowning, and Rod could tell she was irritated over the silence.

Larman finally answered her, “No, I’m not hard of hearing, just thinking about some things I needed to do today. ...Mixie, I found some things interesting last night after my speech at the Lion’s Club. I went down to the hotel, and had a few shots of Bailey’s as usual, and noticed a table across the room. There was Senator Eddelburg and two other guys in suits. I recognized one of them, and it was Banion Catorre from Washington. Banion and I have locked horns in the past. Actually, we have been on opposite sides of some big cases over the years. Banion now represents Alliance Pharmaceuticals, one of the largest drug companies in the United States.”

Rod finished his cup of coffee. “Well, Larman, I imagine you know people all over the place. Did you speak to him?”

Larman continued, “Well, not immediately. I watched the three of them for a while, and I didn’t know the third man at the table. I thought it very interesting that Banion was with Senator Eddelburg, because of the recent press releases from the senator’s office in Washington.”

Mixie interjected, “I saw on the news that Senator Eddelburg was terminally ill and was to retire from the Senate next year.” She smiled at Larman, and then looked at Rod with her classic pout. The young lady was proud of herself, thought Rod.

“Why I thought it was strange,” continued Larman, “is that Senator Eddelburg had sponsored some legislation detrimental to the drug industry, and had criticized several of the big drug companies in the media for some of their

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pricing policies. It was unusual since Eddelburg had been almost another lobbyist for continuing support of the companies in the past.”

Larman got up from his chair and checked his watch.

Rod seemed surprised. “Larman, don’t leave us hanging. Why have you told us this story about last night?”

Larman sat down again. “Well, Professor Hippa had told me, as part of our discussions, that several other large companies had gotten wind of this gohida ama, and had been snooping around down here in Georgia. He specifically mentioned Alliance Pharmaceuticals. Said they would do anything to get the formula, and if we saw any hint of their presence down here, we needed to be alert.”

Mixie asked, “Well, Larman, did you go over and talk to the senator and your old friend, Banion?”

“Yes, I finally went over, and we actually talked for an hour or so. Mostly about old battles in the courtroom, but I never did figure out why the senator was sitting with them. The other guy was one of the biologists with Alliance, and he didn’t say much. Banion said he was down here on vacation and plans to do some fishing. The senator indicated he was here to meet the voters, and for a little relaxation, since his health had not been good.”

“So why, Larman, does this chance meeting dictate that you stay here and relax while Mixie and I go to Pennsylvania?” asked Rod.

“Bottom line, son, is that these guys are not here by chance. They obviously are looking hard for the five steps of the formula, and I wouldn’t be surprised if they knew as much about it as Professor Hippa. And Alliance is not averse to spending a few million dollars down here to get the formula in its complete form. Probably have a bunch more undercover operatives around the city. They might even have been the ones shooting at you two last night.”

“In that case, these guys could follow us to Pennsylvania,” said Mixie.

“No, actually my dear, I plan to coordinate my own operation here with a few of our retained investigators. In fact, we plan to find out where they are staying and maybe follow them for a while. In any event, you two need to get to Pennsylvania, and I have some ideas for providing evasive traveling techniques. This attorney has a lot to do right here in Calhoun.”

After breakfast, Rod went back to his apartment, wrote an email to his parents, checked his incoming emails, and watched the morning news programs. He would be meeting with Larman before lunch to go over the arrangements for the trip to Pennsylvania.

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Since Rod had a few hours before meeting with Larman, he decided to stop down at the gift shop, and say hello to Gerri, who he hadn't seen for a few days. He had missed her, and he hoped she might feel the same.

Rod walked quietly down the aisle in the store, and saw Gerri working on a display with her back to him. He approached and placed his hands around her waist, surprising her.

"Oh, Rod, you scared me," she said. "I thought you had left town."

He gave her a peck on the cheek, and said, "No, no, Gerri, it's been a busy few days, but I certainly missed you."

She smiled at him but seemed a little cool as she turned around to continue working on the shelf.

"Did you miss me?" he asked. Gerri turned around again and shook her head "yes".

"Yes, I did miss you, but I was wondering why you had vanished; especially because of that man."

"That man?"

"Oh, yes, that man who came to visit Daddy," she responded.

Rod glanced around the shop and didn't see any other customers except an elderly lady in the back of the room.

Gerri said, "Yes, there was a man from Washington who worked for a detective agency who stopped to talk to Daddy just before dinner the other night. Daddy said he thought some big company in the Northeast had hired him. Wanted to know what Daddy knew about you, and Daddy said the man was sort of menacing."

Rod frowned. "And what did Daddy tell him?" he asked.

Gerri answered, "Told him you were a paralegal, new in the city. Didn't know much else, though he liked you. It was sort of an awkward conversation, Daddy said."

"Did he give your Daddy a card or name?"

"Yes, I'm sure," she said, "but it made me think that I don't know very much about you either, Rod. You told me on our first date you were from New York, but New York is a big place. Where did you go to school, where do your parents live?"

Rod smiled. "Good questions Gerri, and you deserve some answers. I'll tell you what, I need to go out of town tomorrow, but I'm free tonight. Why don't we go to dinner, and I'll give you my life history...or at least part of it." Rod chuckled.

At that moment two deliverymen entered the store carrying a large box. "Hi there beautiful, going to the tavern tonight?"

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Gerri smiled at Rod, and turned to one of the deliverymen, taking a receipt form to sign. She marked the form, handed it back to the man, and said, "Barry, I'd love to, but I need to do a wash tonight."

The man did a double take, and his friend looked at him smiling. "O.K. lassie, you're missing a good time." The two men headed out the front door for another delivery.

"I guess I can slide my social calendar for you this time, Rod. But don't take me for granted in the future."

"Pick you up at seven," said Rod, with his air of confidence. He turned on his heel, and headed out of the shop, giving a mock salute and a smile.

Gerri stared at him with her arms folded, and then gave a little smile. She would forgive him this time.

As Rod walked across Central Street, he looked around at the passing crowd. Somebody is interested in me, he thought, and any of these people could be following me. It is enough to make me paranoid.

On getting to his apartment, Rod grabbed the morning paper from the stoop, and placed the security card into his front door. It would be nice to relax a few hours before heading out to dinner, he thought. It was time to watch the early evening news and glance at the local paper he hadn't read yet. Rod flipped off his shoes and pulled a beer from the refrigerator, dropping into his new easy chair. He pulled the paper open and read the headlines and sports page.

Then Rod remembered something that Mary Ann Gifford had said last night. What was that about the classified section she was saying? He turned to that section in the newspaper, and saw it was not that long, only two columns.

Then it struck his eye. It was so obvious, if you were looking for it, he said to himself. In the second column there was an entry that made no sense to him. It was gibberish. The words comprised letters, of course, but he didn't recognize any of the words as being from the English language; or any other language, for that matter. Was it a puzzle or code? Yes, that's what Mary Ann Gifford had said. It was a code, Rod remembered. He pulled out his laptop and copied the short paragraph from the classified ad. Rod next read a discussion about the Cherokee code talkers on the Internet. This was worth more research.

Apparently, Cherokee soldiers in World War I and World War II used their ancient language as a way to both convey and conceal critical information during the battles, and across the war zone. Since the tribal language was alien to the enemies of the United States during the wars, the use of the Cherokee language-based codes rendered the enemy unable to decipher the American communications spoken in those languages. Since the records show there were only about forty Cherokees who could talk in this code, the "code talkers" are a

small number of the Cherokee population. The use of the code ended shortly after the Second World War. Or did it? thought Rod, as he read several other articles on the topic.

I'm not sure what this classified ad means, or how to read it. There is no telephone number or ascertainable name in the paragraph, so I assume no one will answer the ad, unless they know the code, he thought.

Rod picked up his cell phone and hit the speed dial. "Hello Mixie, can you do me a favor?"

Mixie had just gotten out of the shower, and said, "Maybe, Rod, what is it?"

"See if you can find out some information tonight about a classified ad in your paper this morning."

"Tonight?" she said after a few seconds.

"Well, we're heading for Pennsylvania sometime tomorrow, and this might be important."

Rod gave Mixie the location of the ad, and she agreed to stop by her office at the newspaper and see what she could find out about who had placed the ad, and if anyone knew whether similar ads were placed in the classified section in the past.

Rod put down his cell phone and turned on the television. He thought some more about the Cherokee code talkers, and how limited the number of talkers must be, so many years after the wars. If we could find the persons in this area who could send and receive the code, we might know more about this secret Cherokee Brotherhood. And more importantly, he surmised, the five steps of the gohida ama formula are written in code, so we need someone to interpret what we may find.

Rod watched the local and the national news' broadcasts, and quickly dressed for dinner. He had to meet Gerri by seven, and he had a lot to think about before tomorrow morning when the three attorneys got together to discuss the trip to Pennsylvania.

As he was leaving the apartment, he noticed a note taped to the outside of his apartment door. He pulled the note off and opened it. It was written in rather poor handwriting, but he was able to read the following:

"Mr. Larren, wanted you to know that the computer tech came to your apartment today, and we assumed you had ordered some work. Was in your unit for about thirty minutes.

Signed, Jonnie, office"

Rod read the note again. "What's this? I didn't order any repairs," he said to himself. Then it hit him. Some unauthorized person was in his apartment that afternoon. He turned and went back into his unit, looking through each room

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to see if anything was missing. Luckily, he had given the note from Mary Ann Gifford to Larman this morning. He walked to each room again but couldn't determine if anything was taken. The furniture and personal items seemed to be in place, and there was no indication of anyone searching through the apartment. Maybe it was just a mistaken repairman coming to the wrong unit, Rod thought. Then he said aloud, "But being here for thirty minutes, that's the problem."

He started toward the door thinking about how he would stop at the apartment office on the way out and give the staff a piece of his mind about their mistake in letting this person into his apartment. Then it dawned upon him. "Bug", of course, that's what it has to be, he thought.

Rod started to pick up the pillows on his couch, but then came to the realization that finding a bug was not a job for him. He would tell Larman, and his boss would send over some security experts to do the job. In the meantime, I'll find another place to spend the night, he decided. There's Gerri, but she lives with her parents. That won't work. And there's Mixie, that won't work either, he thought. Maybe I'll stay in a motel.

Rod drove to Gerri's house, but he thought he was getting paranoid. He kept looking in his rearview mirror. After last night, and his discovery of the intruder in his apartment, he was thinking every car on the road was following him, and every pedestrian was a plant watching everything he did. I can't tell who these people are, he thought. Are they from the Cherokee Brotherhood, the pharmaceutical companies, the FBI? His mind switched to New York City. He was getting homesick for the city, and that seemed strange to him.

Gerri and Rod headed for dinner, after Rod had a brief discussion with Gerri's father. They had picked a small Italian restaurant downtown, the *Wine Tree*. It was actually on the second story of a commercial building, but its small intimate interior made it a favorite of the late-night crowd. Gerri thought it was quaint, and very romantic. Rod liked it because none of Gerri's old or present boyfriends worked there, contrary to his experience at some other eateries in the city. And Rod liked the red interior in the main dining room, everything in red with white trim. The walls were lined with small booths for intimate dining, and there was a big wine cellar; but of course, not in the basement. This was a multi-floor building and there was a real estate office and bank below.

Gerri got her favorite booth, and both ordered some wine before dinner. Gerri was in a cheerful and carefree mood, but was taken back by the story Rod told her about the repairman in his apartment. He didn't tell her that he had called Larman on the way to her house to inform him of the reported repairman.

The restaurant was somewhat deserted by weekend standards, but the background music was romantic, and Rod and Gerri were enjoying themselves.

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“Well Roddy, what a surprise,” came a voice a few feet away.

Gerri and Rod were sitting across from each other having a conversation. Gerri jumped back, obviously startled. Rod never looked away from his gaze toward Gerri. He knew what he heard.

Rod said to Gerri, “Gerri, you know Mixie from the newspaper, don’t you?”

“Yes, we’ve met,” she said with a smile. “But it has been a while.”

Rod recalled their earlier meetings.

There was an awkward silence, as none of the three had anything to say.

Mixie broke the silence, “My date fell through tonight, Rod, and the idea of dining alone does not appeal to me. Can I join you folks?”

Rod knew his answer should be “No”, but that seemed harsh, especially in light of what Mixie had gone through the night before. “O.K.,” he said, equally as coolly as Mixie’s earlier greeting with Gerri. Gerri merely smiled, not knowing what to say.

Mixie slid into the booth, sitting next to Rod. There were another few seconds of awkward silence. Finally, Mixie complimented Gerri on her earrings, and that started some small talk until dinner was served. Rod was embarrassed with the intervention of Mixie, since he could see that Gerri was not pleased. It was to be a special evening for her. But what caught Rod’s eye for the last five minutes was the man sitting in the corner, continuously talking on his cell phone. He was alone and had a bottle of wine and a glass in front of him, but seemed to drink sparingly. Another man joined him, and the two talked together, periodically glancing toward Rod. He was facing them, so he could observe their behavior without outwardly staring at them.

Am I being paranoid again? Rod wondered. The chatter between Gerri and Mixie started to heat up in direct proportion to their wine consumption, but Rod’s mind stayed fixed on the two men in the corner. The food was excellent, and Rod had a few more glasses of wine, though he knew he had to get Gerri safely back home. He excused himself to go to the men’s room, and noted that both men at the table in the corner watched him as he walked across the room. In the men’s room, he could hear the door open, and one of the men sitting at the corner table came up to him, as he was washing his hands.

“Mr. Larren?” the man said, looking directly at Rod. He was wearing sunglasses now, which seemed strange to Rod.

This man intimidated Rod; he felt uncomfortable.

“Why do you ask?” Rod responded, thinking it a weak response.

“Mr. Larren, I have something for you,” said the man, appearing to need no further identification from Rod. He knew who he was.

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The man continued, “My employer is extremely interested in your work as a paralegal. So interested, in fact, that it is willing to give a large amount of money to you for a small part of your work product.”

At least he isn’t going to kill me on the spot, thought Rod. “What work product?” he asked.

“My employer believes you might have in your possession several steps of Cherokee code constituting a significant part of the total formula for making a certain gohida ama. Those code steps might be worth a million dollars apiece, if they prove legitimate.”

“I have nothing that fits that description,” responded Rod. At least now he knew that his efforts since he has been in the city are not a secret to at least one of the unknown competitors for the formula.

The man lit a cigarette, and said slowly and deliberately, “If you should find such items in the future, Mr. Larren, you can be a rich man by calling this number; it is an anonymous answering service. I’m sure a very satisfactory deal can be made for your benefit. If your choice is not to be our business partner, our objectives would require a more gruesome approach.”

The man threw the cigarette into the sink, nodded to Rod, and walked out the door. What was that all about? wondered Rod. Is everyone in this city now trying to kill him? It will be nice getting out of Calhoun for a few days, he thought as he left the men’s room.

He looked at the corner table where the men had been sitting. It was empty.

Gerri and Mixie had quite a bit of wine, and almost seemed to be enjoying each other’s company. Rod was amused, since the evening had not started that way.

“Gerri, I’ll take you home now,” he said as he stood by the booth where they were sitting.

“The night’s still young,” said Gerri.

“I need to get up early tomorrow for my trip, and it’s already late,” said Rod.

Eventually, the three left the restaurant, but Rod could not relax. It had been another stressful day and night, and he now realized his motives might actually be known by people he didn’t even know. I need to get back to practicing law and researching in the library, he said, as he dropped off Gerri at her home. Even if there is a bug in my apartment, I’m too tired to find another place to sleep, he thought, and headed home. Tomorrow would be another day, starting with a meeting with Larman to find a devious way to get to Pennsylvania.

###

Chapter Six

Trip to Pennsylvania

Larman was in good spirits at breakfast with Rod and Mixie. He had a full day ahead, and he knew his two young associates would enjoy their planned trip to southwest Pennsylvania. Larman handed them each a folder, which he explained to them. He was very thorough, thought Rod.

“And while we risk our lives yet again, what do you have planned, Larman,” Rod asked.

“I’m having lunch with Mrs. Mangram, the head librarian downtown. She just adores me, you know. Thinks I’m sui generis, as she said to me after my talk the other night.”

Rod chuckled. “Larman, you’re an excellent actor among other talents. But I didn’t think you were after the ladies on this trip, especially after things I heard about your last divorce.” Rod immediately regretted his attempt at humor at the expense of the senior partner.

Larman frowned, taking a drink of orange juice. “Son, I can’t keep the ladies away, but that’s not my purpose for this meeting. Mrs. Mangram is known locally as an expert in Cherokee history, especially the early Cherokee languages, and the code talkers. I told her I was planning to write an article on the subject and would like to discuss some of the aspects with her. She was pleased and flattered. And flattery always gets cooperation.”

“Why don’t you ever flatter us?” asked Mixie, looking at Rod.

“Your ego’s high enough, Mixie,” responded Larman, “but that may not be all that bad for this assignment.”

Rod had picked up the paper and was browsing it, while Larman and Mixie verbally jabbed each other.

Rod said, “Mixie, why didn’t you tell us about this article about Alliance Pharmaceuticals in this morning’s paper? It says the company announced a new research program into life prolonging drugs, and Senator Eddelburg was working on new legislation in the Senate to initiate substantial tax credits for the program.”

Mixie responded, “I haven’t seen this morning’s paper, but I assume those articles come from our national news’ sources. Somewhat strange that the

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senator is working with Alliance Pharmaceuticals, isn't it? I always thought he attacked the industry for improper testing methods."

Larman turned to Mixie, and said, "Senator Eddelburg is an opportunist, like most of his profession, but I assume his current significant health prognosis might align him with a company looking for a cure to aging. Or then again, maybe it's just a financial arrangement."

After a few more minutes of exchanging news from the firm in New York, Rod slid his chair out from the table, and said, "Mixie, according to the schedule drawn up by our boss, it's time to get our things and get to the airport for stage one of our whirlwind visit to Pennsylvania." Mixie looked down at the materials next to her. She studied them for a moment, as she was gathering her things and placing them in her purse.

"These travel plans are awfully complex, aren't they, Larman?" said Mixie, looking up.

"I'm concerned about the risks to you and Rod, Mixie. My major concern has been to serve our client Professor Hippa, but in the last several days I'm aware that one or more operatives are watching us, and they know a substantial amount about us, and our quest for the complete formula. The stakes here are astronomical, and the ruthlessness of one or more of these operatives may equal the stakes. This complicated plan to prevent someone following you two is well worth the complexity."

Mixie gave a little shiver and looked at Rod. "I hope you plan to stick close to me on this trip," she said with that trademark pout.

Rod didn't directly answer the question. He gave a little grunt. "I wish I could take Mrs. Gifford's over and under shotgun with us." Then he put his arm around Mixie's shoulder, and chuckled. "I'm sure I can protect you," he added. Rod enjoyed the moment, but he wasn't sure his humor was fully appreciated by his young companion.

The plan to go to Pennsylvania was indeed complex. The two attorneys would leave in a cab to go to the local private airport, then fly to Atlanta, then fly to Akron, Ohio, catch a shuttle to Morgantown, West Virginia, and upon arrival, rent a car to drive to Masontown, Pennsylvania. They would travel under the name of Janice and Willard Clark; thanks to some fake identification cards provided by Larman. That guy has more resources than the CIA, thought Rod, as he sat on the plane flying the first leg of the trip. He was relaxed now, but Rod still scanned the plane's coach area for any suspicious passengers. And it was a very small plane, so he could examine the other six people on board quite easily.

Mixie and Rod got to Atlanta without incident, and then to Akron, had lunch, and waited for the connection to Morgantown. Rod kept searching around the airport lobby for any suspicious activity, and studied the people sitting around them. Mixie read a glamour magazine and did a crossword puzzle. They were waiting for the rental car to be available, which was now about an hour overdue. Rod had placed several cell phone calls to Larman, and he reported he had made contacts with the company, and a car would be delivered to the airport shortly.

“I’m glad to get out of Georgia for a while,” said Rod. “I was starting to think everyone around me was going to shoot me.” As he talked, Rod continued to survey the lobby area. A few of the people sitting in the vicinity had left the terminal. Only two of the original travelers remained in position; one a young woman with a laptop, and the other, an elderly man with a hat with a wide brim. Rod looked over at the woman again, and she was now talking into her cell phone, but staring at Rod. When she saw his glance, she looked away.

If this woman represents the group that is following me, what do they want? he wondered. Do they want us dead, or do they want us alive, so they can get our information? And how did they know we would be here? Rod continued to ponder those questions when Mixie looked up from the puzzle, and said, “That woman across from us just left, and I thought she took our picture with her phone as she was leaving.”

Finally, a man in a dark shirt approached Rod, holding a set of keys and a packet of maps. “You’re Larren, I assume. Here are the keys and travel instructions. Your car is parked outside the doors,” he said while pointing to the left.

“And you are?” asked Rod.

“We work for Kingfund, and Larman said this was important. Had to come over from my office specially to deliver this vehicle. There had been a mix-up in our rental office,” said the man.

Rod looked at the man. He had two cell phones on his belt, and some form of two-way communication attached to his waist with cord running to an ear device. He offered no further identification to Rod, nor did Rod ask for any. Mixie reached over and grabbed the keys and map folder, and smiled at the man. Rod looked around the airport lobby again, and now there were a number of additional travelers mulling around. Apparently, another flight had just arrived.

Mixie and Rod got into the black Lincoln, and Rod handed the maps he had been studying to Mixie. “We need to make some time now, since I don’t want to get to Mrs. Winnona’s house too late,” he said.

Mixie dropped the maps on the floor of the car, and said, “Hold it, Rod. Let me check.”

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“Check? What do you mean?”

Rod watched as Mixie felt under the seats and ran her fingers along the doorframes and under the dash. “Never can be too careful about those listening devices and transponders,” she said.

Rod seemed to relax a little, and with a smirk, said, “I’m impressed, and I thought you were only a debutante, and not James Bond.”

“Let’s get going,” she said as she buckled her seatbelt.

Much of the ride to Masontown was in a misty rain, and they got lost only once, and that was a minor detour. It was hilly country now, and the Monongahela River was near. They had crossed several country streams, one time over a quaint covered bridge. Mixie had brought her camera and wanted to take a picture of the bridge, but the light was fading, and Rod discouraged the brief delay. A deer ran along the road as they went through some woods.

“I hope you have studied that map well,” said Rod. “I have no idea where we are at the moment.”

“You’re with the great navigator,” said Mixie, as she looked up from the map in her lap. “I love to study these detailed maps, especially for places I haven’t visited before. It makes me feel like an explorer.”

“Let’s leave the exploring to a later date. Now we have a definite mission,” Rod said.

“I think I can get us there; let’s hope I can get us back to Georgia,” responded Mixie.

Rod surveyed the winding road ahead. “Yes, I never thought I would call Georgia home, but these missions are stressful.”

Mixie looked at a large route sign in the clearing to the right of the road. “There we go,” she said, “Five miles to Masontown.”

As they came to the Masontown Township, Mixie turned to Rod. “Here’s where you need to make sure we aren’t followed to Mrs. Winnona’s house,” she said.

“And how do I do that?” answered Rod, looking at her. “This is a small town, not a complex city.”

“Take this gravel road over there, it seems to lead to a rural area. Then pull aside at a convenient spot, and let’s see who follows us,” said Mixie in a knowing manner.

Rod said nothing to her, but turned at the designated road, and drove along the gravel street away from the commercial highway.

Rod was concentrating on the road as he sped along. Suddenly, Mixie turned to him and said, “Is Gerri your girlfriend?” she asked.

“What?” he said.

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“Do you think you will marry Gerri?” she asked, staring at him. Rod looked at his side mirror, and then back at Mixie.

“Why, do you want to be in the wedding?” he said, shaking his head slowly.

Mixie didn’t appreciate the humor, even though she appeared to recognize the change of thought her interjection of this question provoked. “Well, I like Gerri, she’s a nice girl,” said Mixie. She reminds me of myself.” She was smiling at Rod now. He spun his eyes back to the road, which was getting narrower, and entering a wooded area.

He looked again at his rearview mirror, this time he saw the jiggling image of headlights. It’s not all that dark, he thought, but the rains made it appear so among the trees. He accelerated slightly, but then pressed the brakes to get around a sudden turn, brushing against the bushes close to the road. Rod looked over at Mixie, who did not seem upset or anxious, but appeared to be studying her crossword puzzle. Then she looked back at him. At this point, Rod was holding the wheel tightly, and there was perspiration on his forehead. He lowered one hand and wiped his palm against his pants.

“I think she likes you,” Mixie said.

“What? Are you talking about Gerri?” Rod responded, turning to her with a furrowed forehead.

“I like you, too, Roddy,” she said with her little pout. There was silence between them. Rod was trying to clear his mind, and Mixie felt she had said enough, for today at least.

The car hit a small rock in the road and careened against some high bushes. The road was starting to deteriorate, and Rod was trying to keep the car on the narrow right of way.

“You can turn right in about an eighth of a mile. That looks like a way back into civilization,” said Mixie calmly, as she stared down at the map. She checked her watch but seemed cool as a cucumber.

“O.K.,” said Rod, now thinking he might be riding with James Bond.

The turn was ahead, and Rod saw the old bent stop sign at the intersection. He looked again in the mirror, and the headlights seemed to be closer. Rod pumped the brakes and slid around the turn to the new road. He sighed, for it was a paved road, and even had a centerline.

“What’s that?” asked Mixie, and she looked at Rod staring in his mirror.

“That’s the same guy following us,” he answered.

“No, I mean that noise,” she said.

They both listened. “Sounds like a helicopter,” said Rod.

He looked at Mixie. “Am I totally paranoid, or do we have a reception party here?”

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“You’re probably paranoid,” she said with a chuckle, “but just in case let’s take plan B.”

“What’s plan B?” he asked wide-eyed, as he looked at her again.

“I’m just creating it,” said Mixie, still staring at the map. “This sounds crazy, but we both assume we are being followed, and some sacrifices must be made. And fortuitously, I see a possibility of deception here on the map.”

“Deception... on the map?”

The headlights were getting closer as they drove into a more commercial area. “Here’s the plan B. You drive into the car wash about a quarter of a mile on your right. Thanks to this map with all of the commercial sites shown, it appears that there is a bicycle store next door in this little strip mall. When we go through the car wash, you jump out with the paperwork, and I will drive away leading our chasers on a wild goose chase. You hide in the car wash for a few minutes, and then you go rent a bicycle and pedal to Claire’s house, which looks to be within a mile of this location. Then we meet back together at the bicycle store at the designated rendezvous time.”

“Yes, Mixie, you are insane.”

She wrinkled her forehead and looked at him with a penetrating stare. “Well, Rod, I guess we can drive around until we run out of gas. If we’re being followed, as we surmise, they aren’t going to give up until we lead them directly to Mrs. Winnona.”

“But it’s wet in those car washes, Mixie.”

She took that statement as a ‘yes’. Mixie wrote out instructions for reaching the address of the house where Mrs. Winnona was staying, and the contact number to use for identification, which was given them by her sister. “Here Rod, we will meet at bicycle store at 8 p.m. If there is a problem, you know my cell phone number, but I wouldn’t use it, unless really needed.”

Rod saw the car wash sign ahead and turned into the complex. He inserted some change into the machine, and luckily, no one was ahead of them for the next wash. He looked again behind him, and saw the vehicle, which appeared to be a pickup truck with two people pulling into the gas station across the street. The truck stopped facing the car wash and turned off its lights.

Luckily, the entrance of the car wash was not in line with the parked truck, so the vanishing act might work, thought Rod. The water started to pour down on the Rod’s rented car, and as the first brush started to work back on the top and side of the vehicle, Rod opened the door slightly, and slid out the seat, scratching his arm, but holding the satchel of paperwork tightly. He darted across the lane and leaned against the wall behind a block of equipment. It was at least dry, though he knew he was now on his own. Rod pressed against the

wall for what seemed like five minutes, and then watched his car drive slowly out of the car wash into the early evening air. Then he heard the vehicle speed up as it squealed, turning onto the highway. I wish I could see the truck across the road, he thought, but he didn't want to expose himself, so he waited for ten minutes before walking out of the back of the car wash. He glanced across the street, and the truck was gone. He could no longer hear the noise of the helicopter overhead.

Rod was still wet, but he walked briskly down the back-access road to the strip mall next door, and toward the red neon sign advertising "Bike Central" at the end of the stores. It was a small shop, and Rod noticed the store salesman rolling several bicycles into the store from the sidewalk. Rod looked at his watch, and realized it was about closing time. He needed to hurry, or the entire plan would be impractical. He realized he could ride to Mrs. Winnona's residence.

Rod walked into the store and up to the counter. He turned to a young man with a blue denim shirt and some grease on his hands. "I would like to rent a street bike, and I will return it shortly. How much would that be?"

The young man looked at him, showing confusion on his face.

Then the man said to Rod, "Sir, we only have a day or half-day rental rate, and the next rental period would start tomorrow morning."

"But I need the bike now. I will give you the half day rate right here, and return the bike by tonight," said Rod.

The young man looked at Rod, seeing he was wet and muddy, and was not dressed for a day of road biking. Rod could see the immense suspicion in the man's expression.

"I have an unusual need for the bike this evening, and I can understand your suspicion young man, but I'm not going to steal the bike, I assure you. It will be here leaning on the front door of your store when you come in tomorrow morning." With that, Rod pulled out three one hundred dollars and placed them on the counter watching the young man's face.

"Well, with a deposit like that, I guess it would be O.K.," he said; "the bike I can give you is not worth that much."

"But understand, you can get the deposit only if the bike is here in the morning."

The young man thought for a few seconds, and then responded, "On the other hand, sir, I can give you the bike and keep the deposit, and I won't even need any identification," he said.

"Perfect," said Rod. The two men walked to the back of the store, and examined a red hybrid bicycle, apparently heavily used. "That bike's fine." Rod

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took the bike out the back of the shop, and put on the helmet, which was mandatory.

“Do you want any gloves or shoes?” asked the young man.

“Not necessary,” said Rod, and he rode down the back-service road behind the strip mall. He had the instructions for finding Mrs. Winnona’s house in his pocket. He looked around as he rode, but he saw nothing he recognized as suspicious. But he was worried about Mixie. He needed to get back to her as soon as possible. But first, he had some work to do.

###

Chapter Seven

The Third Sister

The instructions for finding Mrs. Winnona's house seemed simple, but Rod rode around the older neighborhood for about thirty-five minutes before he came to the right street. His incompetency in finding the right street and house surprised Rod because it was a small town, and the residential area, though divided, was not large. The neighborhood was dark, with large oak trees lining the sides of the street. The houses looked to be built during the nineteen forties, and most were two story.

He was glad he had the bike; the walk would have taken too long. He pulled out his cell phone, which had gotten wet in the car wash, but still seemed to work. He called Mrs. Winnona's number. When an elderly woman answered, he let out the breath he had been holding.

"Yes, who is it?" came the voice on the other end.

"This is Rod Larren. I understand your sister Mary Ann Gifford has contacted you and told you I was coming." He then read off the code that Mary Ann Gifford had given him to authenticate the caller's identity.

There was silence on the other end of the phone. Rod repeated the code, now holding his breath again.

Then the woman answered, "Yes, I know who you are. But my sister said there would be two of you."

"My associate Miss Cooper is with me, but she is doing another errand," Rod answered.

Again, there was a silence on the other end of the phone. Rod now felt some anxiety. He had traveled a fair amount with certain stress to get to this point, and he didn't want to blow it at the end. He glanced around the street to make sure no one was walking and could hear the conversation.

Finally, an answer came from the woman. "Well yes, Mr. Larren, you are the person my sister mentioned, and you have the code we agreed upon. I guess we can meet, but please be careful. I am very frightened by everything that has happened since Betsy was killed."

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“I don’t think I have been followed here, Mrs. Winona, but I will be careful. If I come to your front door, may I knock there?” asked Rod. He noted that her house seemed dark, and a newspaper was still in the driveway.

“No Mr. Larren, I’m staying next door with my neighbor, Mrs. Bixby. She lives in the house with the blue shutters and front porch. Come around to the back of the house and knock on the door. We will bring in her dog, since she doesn’t treat intruders very well.”

Rod thought of calling Mixie to make sure she was all right, but he wasn’t sure if there might be a technical device that would intercept his call. He placed his cell phone back into his pants and walked across the dark yard of the neighbor’s house, opened the side gate, and knocked on the back door. There was a light in a side room, but the house was generally dark. The moonlight was not strong, but Rod saw its slight illumination on the white fence at the back of the yard. He also heard a dark barking behind the fence and hoped that there were no open gates. Rod took several more steps across the yard, maneuvering around some bushes and heading toward the yellow light in the window. He perceived that the dog had stopped barking, but he heard a truck driving by the front of the house. Then it became silent again.

Suddenly, a hand from behind him grabbed his arm.

Rod could feel his entire body jump into the air. It felt like he had touched the ends of a high-powered transmission line. His fist instinctively tightened to strike a blow in defense.

“Mr. Larren?” said a short woman standing next to him.

Rod took a deep breath and stepped back from the woman. “Misses Winnona?” he asked in a rattled voice. Rod never heard her approach and guessed she might have been standing in the dark behind some flowered bushes at the back of the house.

“No,” she answered. “I’m her neighbor. I’ll take you to her. She won’t come out of the bedroom she is using in my house.”

The woman placed the key in the lock of the door, opened it, and led Rod up the stairs to a back bedroom. She opened the door and introduced Rod to a small grey-haired lady sitting in a rocking chair in the corner of the room. The woman looked frail, and her skin held the wrinkles of many years. She held a handkerchief in her left hand and had a small scrapbook on her lap.

The light was dim, but Rod could tell the room was immaculate, and was decorated with several Indian paintings and numerous decorative blankets were hung over a rack against the wall.

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The elderly woman, who was introduced as Claire Winnona, was younger than her sister Mary Ann Gifford, but she seemed to have a more elderly and fragile appearance and dressed more plainly.

The woman rose slowly from her seat and walked over to Rod. “Good evening to you, sir. My sister has told me how you saved her life, though I don’t talk to her much. I don’t want any connection so they can find me here. It was so traumatic to move here, so traumatic.”

Rod exchanged small talk with Mrs. Winnona for several minutes. Then the neighbor, Mrs. Bixby, sensing that the conversation would turn to more sensitive issues, excused herself, and went downstairs.

Mrs. Winnona turned to Rod and said, “Please sit down over there young man, I need to give you information. Hopefully, you can end the years of torment I have suffered due to this information. If it can go to the right parties, it will be a great relief to me, regardless of what my Cherokee brothers and sisters may say or think.”

Rod heard that sound of the helicopter again. It passed overhead. He needed to have this conversation quickly, he thought. Mixie wouldn’t have been foolish enough to drive back into this area, would she?

“Fine, Mrs. Winnona, we don’t have to talk long.”

“You can call me Claire, young man. My son called me Claire.”

Rod could see that her eyes were welling up with moisture on the mention of her son.

“He was killed in the war, what a waste. He could have done so much.”

“I’m sorry, Claire. Was he your only child?”

“No,” she answered, but he was the most ambitious. Truly, he was the modern man. Had every electronic device known to man and shunned everything Cherokee. My daughter Evelyn is just the opposite. She lives in the past up there in Michigan. Never writes or calls.”

Claire reached into the bottom drawer of her desk and pulled out a folder of papers. She placed them on the lamp table next to Rod, and sat down in the adjacent chair, adjusting her reading glasses.

“Let’s get to business,” she said, more like a corporate executive than a little old lady.

Rod nodded, pulling out a small pad of paper and pen he had in his shirt pocket.

“As you probably know, Mr. Larren, I am a descendent of one of the primary leaders of the Cherokee Nation here in Georgia. That leadership had been the custodian of a simple formula passed down over the centuries from generation to generation. I personally know little about what it means, but the legend is that

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the complete formula, written in five separate steps, exposes the secret for human longevity, well beyond the current expected life span. The legend tells of various chieftains who tried the potion created by the steps, but the side effects, though they varied with individuals, were a detriment to its use. It became the mantra of the Cherokee leadership that *gohida ama* angered the gods and should not be used by mankind. As a matter of fact, there was a feeling among the group in the know, I'll call them the Brotherhood, that the use of *gohida ama* would cause the gods to destroy mankind, or at least some part of mankind. On the other hand, the leaders didn't want to destroy the formula and preparation steps. It was too valuable a secret, and the Brotherhood became very divided on its use and its destruction, or at least its perpetual safekeeping."

Though Rod had heard much of the story before, he concentrated on the words since he knew this would be the one chance to get this information.

Rod wrote furiously, wishing he had brought a bigger tablet; especially one which had not gotten wet around the corners. Claire rose from her chair and pulled a tissue from her desk. She wiped her eyes and nose, then returned to her chair. She continued her story.

"As I believe my sister Mary Ann told you, the Brotherhood decided to compromise the various positions, and placed a written and coded paper with one of the five steps for the preparation of this life prolonging substance with a selected representative of each of five prominent families in the Brotherhood. In order to avoid the problem of one of these representatives dying or disappearing without passing on his or her stage of the formula, a secondary copy of one of the other steps was given to each representative to use only if the primary holder of the step died suddenly or disappeared."

"You mean that each holder had two steps of the formula, not one?" asked Rod, writing steadily.

"Yes, that's correct, young man. And since my sister Betsy and I were both designated holders of the steps, we each had access to two steps of the formula. Before Betsy died, however, she gave me her steps, since she had given up on bringing the total formula to fruition, and was trying to protect herself from being killed for holding the secrets."

"She was worried about getting killed?" asked Rod.

"Yes, it became common knowledge among the Brotherhood that Betsy had freaked out about her terminal condition, and had talked to a number of people outside of the Brotherhood. And the worse thing for Betsy was that it was known she talked to several scientists and company executives about the existence of the secret formula and how it worked. That was her death knell. She hoped she could give the steps of the formula she had to me, and that would

take the risk away that she would be murdered. I accepted the gifts in secret, but I knew she would disclose the fact she gave them to me, so I disappeared quietly and moved here to an old friend's house who had recently died. So far, I have not been bothered, but lately strange things seem to be happening."

Rod could hear the helicopter noise overhead again. He started to perspire. He gave Claire a moment to gather her thoughts, and then he looked at her. She continued her story.

"Each of the holders of this information has a sequential number. My number is #2, and Betsy was #1. My alternative step of the formula designated another person who was known as holder #3 and died suddenly last summer, but Betsy's alternative step designated me as the primary holder. And you should know, Mr. Larren, each step of the formula is in Cherokee code."

"Wait a minute, Claire," interjected Rod. "Now you're confusing me. Let me make sure I comprehend what you're saying."

"I mean, young man, that I have the first three steps of the formula, but not the last two steps. Since my sister could direct steps #1 and #2, and I could direct steps #2 and #3, only the last two steps are unknown to me. And actually, I have no clue to who possesses them."

Rod was trying to rack his brain for questions. He knew the night was moving quickly. This may be his only opportunity.

"You said 'code'?" he asked. He knew of the code aspect before, but he thought he might get more information about how to break the code and make the actual steps more meaningful.

"Yes, it's a relatively recent development," responded Claire. "Several of the Brotherhood were used by the United States military in the First World War, and I think in the Second World War, to send code using the ancient Cherokee language. These ancestors decided it would be another check on the safekeeping of the total formula if the steps were actually written in code. There is someone out there who can read these steps of the formula, but I don't know who he is."

Claire seemed to be tired, and she was white as a ghost, thought Rod. Maybe he should give her a rest, but he knew time was not on his side. He could see headlights coming along the side street next to the house, but it was not uncommon to see cars in these neighborhoods, he reasoned. As he looked around the room, giving Claire some time to rest, she walked to her desk and pulled out a small iron box. It had some ornamentation on the sides with a gold handle on top. She entered a small key into the lock imbedded in the side of the box and opened the box. She looked up at Rod and smiled.

"This is a great relief to me. It has brought nothing but trouble to our family."

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Claire handed Rod four pieces of paper, each folded into three sections. He took them and looked at each, and then refolded them. All he could recognize on each sheet was a Roman Numeral at the top of each sheet, with two sheets having the number II at the top, one sheet having the number I at the top, and the final sheet having the number III at the top. That would correspond to Claire's story, thought Rod. Each sheet had several paragraphs of strange letter combinations and Arabic numbers, obviously written in this code that Claire had described.

Claire was silent again. After a few seconds, she looked up at Rod, and he could feel the elderly woman's penetrating eyes. Eyes which expressed a lifetime of pain, thought Rod.

"Take those things," she said, "It will be such a relief for me. Tell everyone I have given them to you. Let the world know that Claire Winnona no longer holds the secret of the Cherokee formula."

Rod could see that tears were now rolling over her cheeks. He was at a loss for words. He folded the papers and placed them in one of the dry areas of his shirt, knowing many questions were answered this night, but many remained. And his troubles tonight weren't resolved either, since he had to find Mixie, hide from his perceived pursuers, and get back to Larman with the papers without having them stolen from him or taken from his dead body. And now his thoughts turned to Mixie. What was her predicament at this point?

Rod placed his hand on Claire's forearm. "Claire, I will take good care of this information. I think you made the right decision; your son would be proud of you. Hopefully, this whole burden will be lifted from your family, and we will bring this mystery to a close."

She looked at him again and dabbed her eyes. "This has aged me unmercifully over the last several years," she said in a weak voice. "Hopefully, things will end for me and my sister."

Rod rose slowly, shook Claire's hand, and left the room, walking down the stairs toward the back door. He thanked Mrs. Bixby and disappeared into the night. He had leaned his bike against a fence in the backyard, and he walked the bike to the curb. After surveying the street, he jumped on the bike, checked his watch, and headed for his rendezvous with Mixie. Hopefully, she would be there.

Rod tried to stay on the back streets in the old residential area, but he constantly avoided any traffic, pulling his bike up over the curb and hiding among the alleys or behind some bushes. He didn't know whether his pursuers were still cruising the area, had given up, or had taken Mixie as a hostage.

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Chapter Eight

Escape

Rod wasn't sure if it was better he didn't have a light on this bike or a real disaster. He rode to the corner of a long dark street by watching the reflections on the trees from the half-moon in the sky. Now it was really dark, but he remained paranoid over the possibility one of his pursuers would turn the corner, or the helicopter would spot him moving along the street. At the corner Rod got off the bike and walked it slowly so he could read the sign in the distance. It was a convenience store, and he needed to risk stopping there to get directions. At this point, he was completely lost in this strange city. He walked along the hedgerow and moved behind some bushes when several cars passed. When Rod got to the side of the store, he leaned his bike against the air pump, and moved quickly into the store. It had only one customer buying ice in the back, and the clerk at the front of the store. Rod went to the counter, and looked at the clerk, a heavysset man in his early forties, with long brown hair tied in a ponytail. He wore a blue denim shirt, which hung out over his black pants. He appeared to have shaved last several days ago, and he was counting cigarette cartons behind him on the shelf.

"Sir, can I bother you for a moment?" asked Rod.

"You buying something?" the man asked brusquely.

Rod hesitated. He reached into his pocket and pulled out several dollars. "Let me have some gum," he said. "And a few directions."

Rod reached for several packs of gum and handed the clerk three dollars. "Can you tell me how to get to the Bike Central store, somewhere around here?"

"That place is long closed, man. Opens at ten in the morning. Wouldn't buy a bike there, however. Evan is a real crook."

"That's O.K., I just need to return something to him," said Rod.

The clerk stared at Rod for a few seconds. "Well, his store is two blocks down to the left, but sometimes he don't even make it to the store 'fore eleven."

Rod thanked the clerk and dashed for the door. The clerk held up his hand and yelled out to Rod as he was closing the door. "Man, you look like the guy that the two men described when they stopped earlier. They might be your

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friends. Said you guys got separated after dinner, and they need to find you. Are you the fella?"

"I don't believe so, I don't even live here," responded Rod.

"Did they leave a number?" asked Rod.

"Well, I think they did, but I'm not sure where I put it," said the clerk as he searched around the cash register."

Rod recognized the danger of the situation. He reached into his pants' pocket and pulled out a twenty-dollar bill. It was his last larger bill. "Will this help you find the number?" he said to the clerk, handing him the twenty-dollar bill. The clerk smiled and reached into his shirt pocket. He pulled out a slip of paper, and with his other hand, snatched the bill from Rod.

He looked at Rod, and placed the paper on the counter, and copied a telephone number on a second sheet of paper next to the cash register.

"That's O.K.," blurted Rod, "I can just take the note."

The clerk quickly responded, "Oh no, stranger, I have some other personal notes on this paper." He handed Rod the new note he just wrote. The number appeared to be a long-distance number, but that didn't indicate whether it was someone's cell phone. Rod wanted the original note, but that now seemed improbable without mugging the clerk.

"Thanks man, I'll call my friends right away." Rod stuck the note in his shirt pocket and dashed out the door. He walked down the walk to the corner of the building, and then hesitated. Rod thought for a moment, and then slowly walked back to the edge of the front window of the convenience store and carefully peered through the glass at the clerk behind the counter. He pressed against the large window, but tried to shield himself by looking through a large neon advertising display attached to the inside of the glass.

He could see the tattoo on the clerk's forearm, and the pile of burnt cigarettes on the counter next to him. The clerk was on the phone, and Rod knew it was not an innocuous call, at least as to Mixie and himself. Now he calculated that time was of the essence.

Rod jumped on the bike, and now disregarded the passing headlights. Luckily, there was a wide sidewalk here, and he could roll quickly towards the bicycle store. What if Mixie wasn't there as they had planned? Then he had no plan B. It would be a young man with critical information in his pocket, with no place to turn. Rod knew one simple fact. When these pursuers found him, and got what they wanted, his life might be the next thing to go. And what if these guys got there first, and found Mixie and waited for him? He was sure the clerk gave his contact the information about Rod's interest in the Central Bicycle store. Could he beat them there?

Richard Dodge Davidson

Rod now was getting some speed on his rented bike. He saw the sign for the store and rode across the strip mall to the bicycle store, surveying the parking lot as he rode. It seemed deserted this time of night. Nothing was open here, except the pizza parlor at the far end. Luckily, the bike store was on the other end of the strip. Rod anxiously searched the lot for the black Lincoln that Mixie now had, but he saw nothing in the front of the store. He skidded to a stop, and jumped from the bike, dropping it against the side of the store. He ran around the corner of the building into the darkness, not knowing if any pursuer might ride into the parking area.

Then he felt it. Something heavy landed on his shoulder. Rod jumped into the air; this was the second time tonight he felt that fear.

“You’re ten minutes late, counselor.”

“Mixie, you scared me. My heart may not be that strong,” said Rod, as he hugged Mixie. Did I really do that, he thought. Yes, and I meant it this time. What a relief, he said to himself.

“Where’s the Lincoln?” he asked.

“Around back in the dark. What’s the hurry?” asked Mixie.

“The hurry is the fact that I have the information from Claire, but our mystery pursuers have information from the convenience store clerk that I was headed for this bike shop. We may see some desperate men appear shortly to greet us.”

“You drive,” yelled Mixie as she tossed Rod the keys, and turned and ran around the back of the building. Rod was right behind her. The two climbed into the car, and Rod started the engine with the ignition key, and gave it a burst of gas. The car squealed as it darted forward and came around the end of the strip mall into the side road along the parking area. Mixie looked across the parking lot.

“I hope you were a crazy hot rod type when you were in high school,” she said quietly. “We have some new visitors to the parking lot, and they’re coming this way.”

Rod hit the gas, squealing again around the corner, speeding through the yellow light at the intersection. Now it would be a race for survival, and he guessed these guys behind him were pros at this. Mixie stared out of the back window and held on to the handle on the top of the passenger’s seat, as the car sped around several more intersections. She could see that the lights behind them were gaining, and the pursuit might be over shortly.

“Mixie, we had this assignment here in Pennsylvania all drawn out, and Larman had it set up for us. What we forgot, which seems amazing, is the escape.

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Obviously, we should have anticipated that the pursuers would find us and chase us to get what we had. How stupid were we?”

Mixie looked at Rod. The perspiration was now heavy on his forehead, and his hands felt moist as he grasped the wheel. Rod looked at her again and shook his head. She seemed calm, under the circumstances, he thought. Then, another two-wheel turn, and down a long straight away. The car behind them kept the pace and squealed around the corner. Where are the police when you need them, thought Rod?

“At that next light, turn right,” said Mixie, calmly.

At least she’s studied the map, he thought. But where are we going? He spun the wheel, this time turning through a red light. Luckily, there were no cars coming the other direction. Now the car lights behind them seemed to fade back slightly, and Rod noticed that the countryside was getting more rural again. They were moving away from the downtown area.

“Where now, young lady?” he asked.

“Just keep driving, and in about a quarter of mile, bear left at the fork in the road. It should climb that hill in the distance,” she said calmly.

What does she know which I don’t, he wondered? He was in panic mode, but he was hiding it; the best he could.

They roared over a small bridge, and then Rod saw the fork in the road. Unfortunately, there was a traffic light that he ignored, almost hitting a large truck stopped in the other direction. There was something else Rod saw, which concerned him even more. He had glanced at the fuel gauge, and it was right at “empty.” Now he was starting to get numb from the stress.

Still appearing calm, Rod turned to Mixie, who was again studying the map, and said, “No time to stop for gas, I see.”

She didn’t respond. She was concentrating on the map and holding on to the roof strap as the car bolted from side to side on the road. It was not a heavily-traveled road, and Rod could tell it was getting narrower.

“Does this road go anywhere except to a farmhouse driveway?” he screamed. The car lights behind him now seemed to be moving closer again.

“Calm down, counselor. This is all in a day’s work. Keep your eye on the road, and if you see some red lights in the distance, head for them.”

“Red lights?”

“I think they should be red,” responded Mixie, still studying the map, but raising her eyes constantly and looking to the right of the road.

There were a few seconds of silence, except for the sound of Rod’s heavy breathing.

Then Mixie yelled out, "There they are, turn into that gravel road to the top of the hill. It's in that flat area."

As Rod spun the steering wheel to the right sliding the car onto a gravel road, he turned quickly to Mixie. "What is on the flat area?"

"I think you'll see some friends with a helicopter waiting for us," she said with a smile, partially from relief and partially from accomplishment.

Rod brought the car to a sudden stop next to a man signaling them to stop, and both of the young attorneys jumped from the car. The man waved his arms in the direction of the helicopter, and the three ran as fast as possible, jumping into the open door of the whirling machine.

"Move it, Clancy," yelled the man who was the last to board. The helicopter rose from the hilltop, leaving the Lincoln for the discovery by the occupants of the pursuing car. Rod stared out of the window of the helicopter in disbelief of what just happened, and then he turned to Mixie, who was smiling at him.

"Rod, these guys are friends of Larman," she said.

"Friends of Larman?" Rod said, incredulously.

"Well, I think they are on his payroll, at least," she said.

"Mixie, let me in on the secrets. It's my life at stake, too."

She gave him her trademark cute look, and said, "Well Rod, I was thinking of an escape plan, and as I was leading our pursuers around town for an hour or so this afternoon, I thought it might be time to call Larman. I lost the guys for a few minutes in a parking garage downtown, so I dialed up Larman's number, and get him out from a croquet party, of all things. I explained the exigency of the situation and asked him what the escape plan was."

"What did he say?" asked Rod, now listening intently.

"His curt response was that he was surprised we were followed to Masontown."

"That was his plan?" asked Rod, with a sarcastic tone.

"Well, apparently he did have a plan B, and he told me to take a few notes on how it would work. The timing was tight, I admit, but old Larman pulled it off. He must be connected to the CIA, or some outfit more powerful."

Rod was now breathing slower, and he felt his pocket to make sure the papers from Claire Winnona were still in his possession. The chopper moved quickly over the terrain, as both Rod and Mixie were fixated on the terrain below them.

"I'm George Kellman," the man sitting across from them finally said. "I'm part of this special mission."

"Special mission?" asked Rod.

"Yes, special mission," repeated George Kellman. Those were the last words he spoke, except to wish them well when they departed the helicopter in

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Morgantown. Kellman handed each of them a ticket to Columbus, Ohio, and then to Atlanta. Rod looked at the envelope, and inside was another identification card. It was a Florida license for Jack Tierney with a picture of Rod on it. Larman thinks of everything, he thought. How can he be this efficient? Rod looked over at Mixie, who was examining her envelope.

“We’ll be in Calhoun in no time,” she said with a smile.

“I’d like to be back in the library stacks in New York,” responded Rod, with a smirk.

“Then you wouldn’t be with me,” Mixie said, as she turned to head to the gate for the next flight.

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Chapter Nine

The Competitors

The flights back to Georgia were long, but no further incidents occurred. Rod slept well, while Mixie completed several sheets of crossword puzzles. Larman, of course, was at the Calhoun airport with a security expert Rod hadn't met before. Rod expected he would be greeted by his boss, if for no other reason than to make the transfer of the three written steps of the formula, which Rod carried back from Pennsylvania. Larman had another plan to safely secure the papers, since he was well aware at this point that Calhoun was heavy with agents looking for the formula steps. Rod wasn't sure who the agents were, but it was a relief to hand the three papers to the tall man standing with Larman.

Rod still was exhausted, even though he slept on the flight back to Georgia. It was inconsiderate of Larman to call a meeting the next morning at eight o'clock in the city park, of all places. Rod was only joking when he accused Larman of thoughtfulness the night before at the airport. He knew it was critical to get all parties together as soon as possible to review all that had happened in the last several days, and the park was as good as any place. Larman explained that he thought his bed and breakfast home was probably bugged by now, since his association with this project was likely well known. In any event, the weather was nice, the setting tranquil, and the three attorneys enjoyed the fresh air exchanging stories while sitting on two benches facing each other. The park was a highlight of Calhoun and had been renovated recently. It had brick walks and the smell of lilac bushes. At this time of the morning, the area near the benches was deserted.

Rod and Mixie related all of the activities in Pennsylvania, and Larman sat and listened, with a toothpick in his mouth. He had gotten a new pair of glasses since they left for Pennsylvania, and it gave their boss a slightly different appearance. And there was some stubble on his chin, so Rod figured he was trying to grow a goatee. Since Larman had been in Calhoun, he had enjoyed the arts, somewhat strange for a New Yorker, thought Rod. There certainly was a great deal of art in New York, but maybe Rod just didn't realize Larman's previous involvement. The senior partner appeared different to Rod than his

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first impressions back in New York. Maybe his true inner being is escaping here in the hills of Georgia, thought Rod.

When the two young associates finished relating their experiences from the last two days, Larman congratulated them on a job well done. He watched some men walking along the edge of the park for a while without speaking, and when the men had passed, Larman turned to Rod and Mixie with some news of his own.

“I’ve immersed myself in the local community, as you know,” Larman said. “After many years of practicing law and investigating my cases, I’ve always thought that local involvement was an excellent way of getting the facts and opinions.” Larman had a thermos bottle on the bench, and he picked it up and poured some more coffee into a paper cup he had brought with him.

He continued, still keeping track of his surroundings. “This is where I think we are. I have been fortunate enough to be invited by the mayor to meetings of a number of civic organizations. Mayor Deen believes I am a poet and writer, and that I am working on a book about this city and the prominent citizens here. He has been very cooperative with his time. The extra bonus is that Mayor Deen is a prominent member of the local group of Cherokee descendants, and he has given me many lessons in the history of the Cherokee Nation, and how it still exists around here. The good mayor has even told me about the Brotherhood, but says that it’s only a handful of citizens, but a very dedicated group. It’s sort of an offshoot of a Cherokee secret society in Oklahoma known as the Keetoowah Nighthawk Society. It was originally formed to promote the Cherokee customs while the federal government was trying to dilute the culture with other American cultures. The group here is secret, and not always law abiding. The mayor said he has no idea who is still a part of the group. Mayor Deen tells me the entire subgroup is fixated on dealing with the legend of gohida ama. That story has bounced around the Cherokee descendants here in Calhoun for hundreds of years.”

Then Mixie said, “But Larman, we know all about the legend, and it appears it may be true based on the last several weeks.”

“Professor Hippa and the three sisters certainly think it’s true,” Larman responded. “And you know the first rule of legal representation; ‘The client is always right.’”

Rod then spoke, “So Larman, do you think the Brotherhood killed Betsy Satterly because they thought she was going to expose some of the secrets of gohida ama, and they were against it?”

Larman, looked at Mixie and Rod, and said, “That’s a good possibility. Unfortunately, we have no idea who the Brotherhood represents or what good

citizens still are secret members. They could be anyone here in Calhoun, or in the area, for that matter.”

“But there are other candidates as possible murderers of Betsy Satterly,” said Larman.

“Several other candidates?” asked Mixie.

“On the other side of the proverbial coin,” continued Larman, “we have the parties who are trying to get their hands on the formula intact, so they can produce gohida ama and become fabulously wealthy. That group would include several pharmaceutical companies, especially Alliance Pharmaceuticals. It also could include my old acquaintance, Senator Eddeburg, who seems to be in Calhoun quite a bit lately. But I don’t think the senator is in it only for the possible wealth it could deliver. My guess is that he needs gohida ama to counteract his terminal condition, though his new affinity for Alliance Pharmaceuticals may indicate some partnership there. All of these parties could be moving in different paths to find the five steps of the formula, and any or all of them have the financial resources to go to almost any extreme.”

“But would they kill Betsy Satterly?” asked Rod. “Or try to kill us on several occasions?”

“The potential prize is so big, anything is possible. I would say it may be probable in order to get their goal,” said Larman.

“That’s not fair then,” interposed Mixie. “We don’t know who will kill us?”

“Exactly why we need to be smarter and more careful,” responded Larman.

“There is one other lead I got from Mayor Deen,” added Larman. “He knows a little about the Cherokee code talkers, and told me that local knowledge is that one of the last code talkers from the war years lives here in the Calhoun area. He couldn’t recall his name, but he recalled he lived in the Oakman area. He agreed to ask some of the locals about the man and said he would get back to me if any information was forthcoming.”

Rod shrugged and said with a smile, “So Larman, you’re saying to us that we can be murdered by various secret perpetrators with reverse motives and tremendous incentives. I now fully realize why I had second thoughts about this law firm assignment.”

Mixie seemed to be in deep thought and didn’t get back into the conversation. She turned to Rod, and said, “Roddy, I need to get my hair done this morning. Can you give me a ride over to Southern Avenue?”

“Well Larman, apparently we’re not getting much done on this case today,” said Rod, looking over at Mixie. She smiled back at him.

“All right, Mixie, I can give you a lift, but I need to stop back at my apartment first to pick up a few things I need to take back to a store over on Southern.”

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“O.K., you two,” called out Larman; “I guess we can take it easy today after what you went through yesterday. But, be careful. Someone knows you have something they want.”

Rod and Mixie jumped into Rod’s new rental car, a red convertible. His prior rental had transmission trouble, and upon returning it last week to the rental company, Rod had decided to get sporty. The car fit Mixie’s inclinations, and met her standards as a passenger.

The two attorneys sped across the city towards Rod’s apartment. Turning down his street, Rod turned to Mixie, and said, “You know, Mixie, I wish Larman could find that code talker he was telling us the mayor mentioned. I went to the classified section again this morning, and there was another block entry in some kind of crazy code. Wonder what it means, especially for us?”

Mixie nodded, and said, “Rod, I did ask my editor about those ads after we talked the other day. He said they are dropped in our box in a brown envelope with cash to cover the publication costs. Said he had no idea who dropped them off, but the fees were correctly covered, so the paper always prints them.”

Rod thought for a minute, as he waited at the last light before his apartment. “You know Mixie, the fact that there is a need to place the ads must mean that there is more than one code reader in the area, assuming it is Cherokee code. It’s got to be some communication between different parties, and whomever they are, they have to be fluent with the code.”

“Beats me, Roddy,” said Mixie, with a smirk, “I never understood French in eighth grade.”

“You took French in eighth grade?” he asked, as he turned into his driveway.

Rod pulled his new car up into the parking lot and jumped out. “Care to come in while I get my things?” he asked.

“You’re such a neat freak, Rod, I’m always envious when I see how organized you are.”

Mixie opened the side door of the car and grabbed her pocketbook. She followed Rod into the apartment. Rod turned his key and pushed open the door. Then he jumped back.

“Wow,” he yelled. “What a mess!”

Rod stepped aside, and Mixie slid in front of him. “I assume this place has changed since you left this morning,” she said.

“Even my clothes are all over the place,” said Rod.

“You have either some nasty enemies who want to do nasty things to your apartment or someone is very anxious to find something you have hidden,” said Mixie as she walked around picking up some cushions, which had been thrown from the couch. The two of them worked for several minutes picking up the

living room of the apartment. Rod walked around to see the other rooms and came out to report.

“The bedroom is a mess, too,” he reported. “I hope these guys took out their bugs when they left,” he said with a chuckle.

Mixie said, “This is nothing to laugh about Rod, these people are dangerous.”

Rod picked up the magazines on the floor. Mixie walked into the bedroom.

“Wow Rod, this is a mess. It looks like they took your bed apart. They were thorough...I have a few minutes to spare before I need to get going to the hairdresser, let me give you a hand.”

The two worked on cleaning up the piles of books and papers scattered in the living room, and Rod worked in the kitchen while Mixie went into the bedroom to clean up Rod’s clothes, which littered the floor.

“I can’t get this bed back together,” she yelled from the bedroom. Rod walked into the room, and his first glimpse of Mixie found her leaning over the end of the broken bed trying to fasten the connecting hinge. Her miniskirt was pulled high on her thighs, and Rod felt male arousal. That was certainly a nice view, he thought. Rod hesitated, but stood by the door for a moment. Mixie stood up, this time showing some cleavage from her partially open blouse. Rod stared at Mixie, experiencing a degree of sensation he remembered from his high school years, but now it was intense.

“Are you going to help, or just stand there, Roddy?”

Rod had learned during the last several weeks that Mixie called him Roddy when she felt like toying with him, or perhaps when she was attracted to him, he mused. She bent over again to resume her labor on the bed connection. Rod walked over and stood next to her, and reached down to help connect the bed frame. He brushed against her thigh, and she didn’t move away. Rod leaned further, pressing against her leg. Both stopped all outward activity. The two were frozen in some form of sensual touch. Mixie looked up at him, but didn’t stand up. Rod felt many things, and one was confusion. He wanted to hold her, not just rub against her. He felt like taking her clothes off and he guessed she wouldn’t resist. They stared in each other’s eyes for a brief moment. Mixie was there for the taking, and a million thoughts went through Rod’s mind. Yet, there was a missing piece he couldn’t explain. Rod felt embarrassment and rotated his body away from the “fire”, struggling with his feeling of lust. He was unwilling to reshuffle the deck with Mixie, at least now. His will power would need to diffuse Mixie’s dominance. Rod would maintain the status quo, even if it killed him.

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“You’re going to be late,” he said slowly as he stood up. He turned away from Mixie, who remained kneeling next to the bed frame. “We need to get you to your appointment.”

Mixie looked at Rod with subtle surprise, and then with obvious embarrassment. She turned away and stood up facing the far wall. Mixie dusted her blouse and walked toward the door.

Rod left the room, grabbed his coat, and walked out the front door towards his car. He sat in the convertible and turned on the radio. A few minutes later Mixie came out of the door and entered the car. The two rode to Southern Street without further words between them.

Rod had planned to stop at Gerri’s house on the way back from dropping off Mixie. Somehow, it just didn’t feel right now, he thought. He drove around the neighborhood where Gerri lived for a while, but tomorrow I’ll stop over to her house, he said to himself. I’ll feel different then, he thought.

Rod drove home and finished organizing his apartment, and then called Larman to tell him what happened to his apartment. Larman wasn’t surprised since he knew that Rod, and even Mixie, were now marked people, since whoever was frantic to get the formula steps could now guess who had obtained some of them.

Larman seemed in a hurry to make a few calls back to the firm in New York, but he ended the cell call with Rod by indicating that he had seen Senator Eddelburg down at the *Five Gold Pieces*, the local pub, after lunch, and they had arranged to go to dinner that night.

Larman said, “The senator said he was bringing Banion Catorre, who is the attorney and lobbyist for Alliance Pharmaceuticals, so I think it is only proper that I bring a guest or two. Are you and Mixie interested?”

A nice dinner sounded good to Rod. He could not speak for Mixie, but he assumed she would be interested, especially since she would have a new perm.

Rod answered, “That’s fine, and I’ll bring Mixie. I know she’ll have a new doo, and nowhere to go. I think I can talk her into it.”

“Fine,” said Larman, “We’ll see you at seven for cocktails at the Hotel Bar.”

Rod pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and hit the speed dial for Mixie. She answered after several rings.

“Mixie, Larman got us a dinner invite with Senator Eddelburg and one of the guys from Alliance Pharmaceuticals at the hotel tonight at seven. Interested?”

There was silence on the other end of the line. He knew that Mixie wasn’t really happy with him this afternoon, but he would play it cool, and just be his normal self; whatever that was at this point, he thought.

“Oh, I guess so,” finally came her answer, without any apparent enthusiasm.

Rod then added, "Fine. Do you need a ride back from the parlor?"

"I'm good. Ran into Cheryl Mason at the hairdressers, and we're going to do some shopping at the outlet stores, and Cheryl will bring me home. We have a number of places to go, so I may be a little late to the hotel, so I'll drive myself and meet you there sometime after seven."

"Sounds good," said Rod, as he hung up the phone, and turned on his television. He was glad it worked, since it appeared that his intruders had taken the back off and had only partially replaced the machine screws.

He was only half watching a local news program as he thought about the possible reasons Larman had set up dinner with Senator Eddeburg. Then he heard the senator's name on the television and looked up at the flat screen. There was the senator being interviewed yesterday in Atlanta. He was arguing for a new large museum in Calhoun highlighting Cherokee Nation history. The senator was enthusiastic about getting financing from a special budget bill he was sponsoring. It's interesting how much of a Cherokee supporter Georgia's senior senator is becoming; it's almost like he was trying to curry favor with some of the Cherokee citizens, thought Rod. The reporter was pressing him, since this position totally reversed his previous stance, which was very strong for removing similar provisions of the tax code. Times change, don't they? mused Rod. Maybe I'll have a chance to talk to the good senator tonight at dinner about these issues, surmised Rod. But then again, Larman probably has other ideas for this evening, he concluded, as he flipped the channel to the Georgia game.

Rod got to the hotel early that evening, about six forty-five, but needed to wait until seven fifteen when Larman strolled into the Bar with the senator and a tall dark-haired man in a grey suit who Rod assumed was Banion Catorre. The arriving men looked like they may have met earlier and had stopped at an intermediate watering hole, probably the Hillsborough Tavern, across the street. They seemed jovial, and Rod felt in a party mood himself, since he had several Manhattans while he was waiting. The senator walked to Rod and shook his hand firmly. He introduced Banion, and the four men ordered another round of drinks to take to their table.

"My associate, Mixie, will be joining us soon," announced Rod, as they walked across the dining room to their reserved table.

"You gentlemen will appreciate the addition of substantial glamour to our motley group when the young lady appears," said Larman, and he pulled out his chair, and signaled the maître d'. "There will be a young lady joining us," he said to the short, heavy-set maître d', "and you will know the young lady when she comes, I'm sure of that."

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The men sat down to enjoy their new round of drinks, and the senator related the week in the Senate, and told some war stories of his leadership in current legislative battles. The senator wasn't a modest man, thought Rod, and probably somewhat of a bluffer. In any event, he was clearly a politician, and Rod knew one had to know the backstory of the topics being discussed by the senator in order to understand his motives in telling the story. He clearly was trying to impress Larman, but Rod wasn't sure why.

Rod was more interested in the senator's guest, Banion. At first, Banion didn't say much, but Rod could sense that this man was analyzing his companions before expressing any of his own views. Banion seemed to be concentrating on each participant in the conversation, which made Rod uneasy when he felt the man was observing him.

"We have major projects on the table for this area," said Banion, when the senator paused from telling his endless stories to order another drink. "We feel there may be a big break in a longevity drug, and we are planning to develop it right here in Calhoun." The senator looked at Banion, somewhat taken back by his comment.

Larman looked at Rod, but his young associate knew it was not the time for him to respond to Banion's comment.

Rod looked at the waiter coming with another round of drinks. The men waited until the waiter left the table before Larman broke the silence, "That's interesting, Banion, we have a client who is working on the same drug, but I'm not sure whether it is just a pipe dream at this point."

Banion smiled. He had stimulated the response he wanted. He would not let the subject drop.

"So Larman, you and your attorneys are here on behalf of an unnamed client to investigate a similar project?"

Rod looked at Larman and then Banion. The two men were staring at each other, both with a small smile on their lips.

Larman decided to bring the conversation to an immediate culmination. Both sides in the conversation were going in the same direction, observed Rod. He now recognized that the elaborate introduction of the three attorneys from New York as the cub reporter, attorney, and poet hadn't fooled these two guys.

Larman said, "Yes, our client is interested in finishing his development of a substance to affect human cells; in fact, to extend the life of the cells, to some extent. That's why we find this area of Georgia so interesting. The Cherokee Nation's legend of *gohida ama* certainly has gotten our attention."

Banion glanced over at Senator Eddelburg.

Rod checked his watch. Mixie said she would be late to dinner, but he had expected her sooner than this.

Senator Eddelburg broke the temporary break in the conversation by saying, "So you're aware of gohida ama, then. Have you had any success in finding the formula? I understand it's divided into steps, each step being held by a separate person."

Rod now realized that Banion and the senator knew well the details of the segmented formula, with the separated steps. Actually, Rod now suspected that the senator and Banion were probing Larman, perhaps well aware that certain steps of the formula had been uncovered.

Banion turned to Rod. "Young man, I understand that you have had some exposure to the formula."

Rod was taken by surprise and looked at Larman.

Larman took the cue, and interjected, "Well Banion, Rod certainly has been instrumental in representing our client here in Calhoun, but of course, the details of his activities are confidential."

Banion seemed to anticipate that response. He turned to Larman, and said, "Yes, Larman, of course, as is our work here. We believe there are a few parts of the formula, which have been found, and our resources are definitely available to compensate the holder of that information. In the meantime, we are working to find the formula and specifically, the holders of the steps of the formula. We don't have all of the answers yet, but I'm sure they'll be forthcoming, and a partner in this project could benefit astronomically."

"You seem to know more about this formula than we do, Banion. I'm not sure we could help you much," answered Larman. "But we will keep in touch, if we can add to your knowledge."

Banion looked at the senator again, and the senator took over the conversation, switching it again to several amusing stories about his interest in modern art. The early sparring had been concluded, thought Rod. Both sides would now reconnoiter and plan their next move.

The conversation turned to stories about the local community. The diners decided that waiting for Mixie at this point would be inconvenient, since it was already eight thirty, and the liquor intake had made the drinkers rather inebriated. The four men ordered their meals, and Rod excused himself and walked into the hallway outside the dining room. He was now getting concerned about Mixie. She wouldn't be this late without calling, he reasoned.

Rod pulled out his cell phone and hit the speed dial for Mixie. The phone rang but only a recorded message followed the rings. Mixie didn't have a landline phone in her condo, and she lived alone. Rod tried to think of the friend Mixie

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mentioned earlier that day, but his inebriated state drew only a blank. He had no idea how to reach her or find her at this point, so he went back to the table where a raucous discussion was ensuing. The subject matter of the social exchanges had deteriorated, and Rod knew the purpose of the dinner had been accomplished earlier. Now he could only sit and listen, but he was worrying about Mixie, and her absence at the dinner.

Rod noticed that Larman slid from his chair and was heading to the men's room. Rod quickly excused himself and followed Larman into the hall.

"Larman, I'm very concerned with Mixie's absence. She would notify us if she had something come up."

Larman stared at Rod. He obviously was a serious drinker, but tonight's drinking had exceeded his safe zone. Rod noticed his eyes were red, and he was unsteady as he walked toward the men's room.

"Yes...oh, yes, I noticed that too," he said, somewhat incoherently.

Rod grabbed his arm and looked him in the face. "Larman, we need to do something, and find Mixie. We all know that our lives are at risk around here."

"Do you know where she was going?" Larman asked, now focusing on the problem.

"She was going shopping with another woman, and then I guess she was stopping at her condo and getting dressed for dinner. I assume Mixie would have driven here to meet us," replied Rod.

"And you called her?" asked Larman.

"No answer," responded Rod.

Larman looked at Rod, without further comment. He appeared to be gathering his thoughts. "Well, let's go to her condo, and check it out."

Larman and Rod returned to the table and excused themselves for the evening. Rod brought his car up to the front door of the hotel, where Larman stumbled into the front seat. They drove quickly to Mixie's condominium. The door was locked, and no one answered the knock. There was no activity in the condo office, since it was now late, and any staff left hours ago.

"Should we call the police?" asked Rod.

"I'm not sure how they would react," answered Larman. "She's only been missing from our knowledge for a few hours. Let me make a few calls."

Larman pulled out his cell phone and called several of his local contacts. Rod wasn't sure who these people were, but Larman seemed somewhat confident that they might track down his young associate.

"I have a few private investigators and security people who we retain on call," he said with a smile. Rod watched his face, and the smile soon changed to a look of concern.

“You know, Larman, we didn’t check the parking lot at the condo for Mixie’s car, maybe it was there.”

The two attorneys hadn’t gotten far from the condominium, so Rod turned and headed back to Mixie’s address. He drove slowly through the parking lot looking for her car. It was a silver Saab, with a Georgia Bulldog sticker on the back window; he knew that.

“There it is,” called out Rod. He looked over at Larman. The old man had his eyes closed and was breathing heavily. He opened his eyes and stared in the direction Rod was pointing. The car pulled up alongside the Saab.

Rod opened his car door, and he hustled over to the driver’s side of the silver vehicle. He peered into the car. Rod saw several store packages in the back seat, but no one in the car. It was locked. Rod felt himself shiver, but not from the cold. Now he really had concern for Mixie’s safety. As he returned to his car, he noticed a yellow piece of paper under the driver’s side windshield wiper blade. He walked over to it and pulled the paper from under the blade. He opened it and read it. Rod looked up at the condo building, and turned toward Larman. He walked to his car, slid into the driver’s seat, and handed the paper to his inebriated companion.

“Apparently, our Mixie has been kidnapped,” he said, staring ahead.

“Is there a ransom demand?” asked Larman, now appearing instantly to get sober.

“No, just this paper with this black feather illustration. No note at all,” answered Rod, handing the paper to Larman.

Larman examined the note, turning the paper over to check the back.

“This might mean she was taken by the Cherokee secret society, that Keetoowah offshoot,” said Rod.

“Or someone might want us to think that,” noted Larman. “Then again, there might be a reasonable explanation for her disappearance. In any event, our reluctance to involve the local police needs to be re-thought. I was hoping we could handle this assignment without police involvement, but this development has changed my mind.” With that, Larman pulled out his cell phone, and dialed a number he had logged into the phone.

“Hello, is Detective Lonebird there?” Larman asked. It appeared to Rod that Larman knew this detective. In several seconds Larman connected to the detective, and began discussing his concern over his missing associate. Detective Lonebird told him to wait by her car, and he would send out an officer within a few minutes. After exchanging some additional information, Larman disconnected the call, and turned to Rod.

“This case is becoming complicated,” said Larman.

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“Yes,” Rod said.

Larman continued, “Now, based on what you have learned from the sisters, I suspect the Cherokee legend may be true, and this gohida ama may exist. It even may be effective in showing us a new way to stop aging. But there is competition to find the answers, and some of it may be very sinister.”

“You’re not saying we should give up, are you?” asked Rod, squinting at Larman.

“No, not exactly,” responded Larman. “Maybe we just need to re-tool. I’m shaken by this disappearance of Mixie. The high level of danger you found in Pennsylvania was troubling to me, but this added development really has me concerned.”

Rod had not seen his boss like this before. Larman always was confident; most times firmly brash. He was the man who instilled confidence in Rod. This was a surprise. What’s next? thought Rod.

###

Chapter Ten

Kidnapping

Much to Larman's surprise, the investigating officer who appeared at the scene of Mixie's car was actually Detective Lonebird, and he had a uniformed officer with him. The two representatives from the Gordon County Sheriff's Office came over to Larman, who had left Rod's car, and were standing next to Mixie's parked vehicle.

"Our associate, a young woman named Mixie Cooper, appears to be missing from her condo, and this is her car. We're concerned because she was to meet us for an important dinner this evening, and never showed up or called," said Larman. "And here is a note we just found on her windshield."

Larman handed the note to Detective Lonebird, who opened it, and then handed it to the accompanying uniformed officer, who placed it in a plastic bag.

Detective Lonebird turned back to Larman, and said, "This is an interesting note, Mr. Kingfund. It does raise some questions in this matter. On the other hand, if this woman has only been missing for several hours, it seems somewhat premature to start a full investigation and search for her, doesn't it?"

Larman looked over at Rod, who had joined the group next to Mixie's car. Rod detected that Larman was considering how much to tell the Detective. He knew his boss was reluctant to involve the police in his business here in Calhoun. It was a balancing act, but now the stakes had jumped to another level. How much did Larman know about Detective Lonebird? Rod wondered. He appeared to be Native American, and probably from Cherokee ancestry. Maybe he even was a member of the Brotherhood, thought Rod.

"As you know detective, I am an attorney from Kellog & Hood in New York, and, with my two associates, have been working on some preliminary investigations for a client who works for a large institution of higher learning. Part of our case has been impacted by the murder of Betsy Satterly last year, and part of our assignment deals with some ancient artifacts from the Cherokee Nation."

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Detective Lonebird looked up from his notes upon hearing the reference to the Cherokee Nation. “How does your work here have relevancy to your missing associate?” asked the detective.

“There are apparently people in this city looking for the same things as we are,” replied Larman, “and their motivations for finding these artifacts might involve some form of foul play.”

“And that foul play might involve harm to this Mixie Cooper?” asked Detective Lonebird.

“Possibly,” responded Larman.

“Why are these other pursuers of the artifacts unknown to you? And why are these artifacts so valuable to everyone?” asked the detective. He continued to write in his notebook, while the uniformed officer was inspecting Mixie’s automobile. Rod watched the officer dust the door area for fingerprints.

“You have no idea, none whatsoever, of who these other people are?” said Detective Lonebird.

“I think they might be connected with some large companies looking for these same Cherokee artifacts, or possible members of a secret Cherokee society,” said Larman.

“These artifacts aren’t the five steps of the formula for gohida ama, are they?” asked the detective, without looking up from his pad.

Larman looked at Rod. It was evident he was taken by surprise by the detective’s question.

Larman regained his composure, “We have been pursuing the steps of the formula for a client, that’s correct. Are you aware of a secret organization in the area which protects the formula?”

Detective Lonebird rubbed his chin and stared across the parking area. “Yes, though the number of descendants in the Brotherhood is very small these days. They have caused a problem from time to time, but I couldn’t tell you today who is still in that group.”

“What have they done in the past?” asked Rod.

Detective Lonebird looked at Rod. “This group has been around Calhoun for decades. I heard it originally emanated from a group in Oklahoma that was trying to preserve the customs and traditions of the Cherokee Nation. I know back in the thirties there were problems with some of its members trying to destroy property of some families whose ancestors were considered traitors to the Cherokees. I mean these ancestors worked with the government to kick out the majority of the Cherokees back in the early nineteenth century. That being said, the only news I hear these days from the Cherokee descendants is that the Brotherhood, or as they call themselves, the Ah-ni-ni, have formed a pact to

prevent the formula for gohida ama from getting in the hands of the white-man's corporations."

"The Un-anna-di?" asked Rod.

"Yes, it's the old Cherokee name for the group."

"Did you ever know anyone who used gohida ama?" asked Larman.

"No, but that doesn't mean anything. There are reasons this Brotherhood is so adamant about protecting the secret. They must think it exists. Word was that Mrs. Satterly started talking about some part of the formula that she was given, and it got around; probably could have caused her murder. Hard to say, we never could determine a motive or get any significant clues to that killing. I understand her youngest sister took off and went into hiding as a result of the murder."

The detective walked around Mixie's car, and talked briefly to the uniformed officer, who was still taking some measurements within the inside of the vehicle. Detective Lonebird then walked over to Larman, and while looking toward the condominium building said to Larman, "We'll need to check out the condo unit, and I'll put out the necessary information to start searching for your associate. In the meantime, stay available in case we need some more information."

Larman and the detective exchanged some contact information. Then Larman asked, "Detective Lonebird, I'd like to stop down at your office sometime to discuss that Satterly case with you."

The detective responded, "Just call to make sure I'm there, Mr. Kingfund. Much of the file is public record at this point, though some of the detail we're keeping confidential for purposes of the investigation."

Rod walked over to Detective Lonebird as he was walking back to his car. "I'm very worried about Mixie's disappearance. I hope you can do something."

"We'll look into it right away," said the detective.

"Do you think this secret brotherhood could actually try to harm her if they thought she knew about the actual steps of the formula?" asked Rod.

Detective Lonebird gave a gesture as to say, "Who knows." "I would be surprised young man, but feelings run deep among the Cherokees around here about the injustices they endured. Not so much today, but in the past, especially when their ancestors were forced to take the Trail of Tears to Oklahoma. Lost everything around here. Could say it was man's inhumanity to man, at its worst, I suppose."

With that, Detective Lonebird drove away. The uniformed officer told Larman that several other crime team officers would be at the condo shortly for a thorough search for clues. Then he drove off following Detective Lonebird's car.

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Rod turned to Larman, “What do you think that picture of the feather on the sheet of paper meant?” asked Rod.

“First guess would be some Indian symbol; my second guess would be a diversion by someone who wanted us to think it was the Cherokee Brotherhood,” answered Larman.

Rod added, “I noticed that Detective Lonebird looked at the picture for a long time. I felt that he knew what it meant, but didn’t want to discuss it with us.”

Larman looked back at Rod. “Yes, could be that Detective Lonebird knows more about Cherokee traditions and the Un-anna-di than he’s telling us.”

“No point driving around to retrace Mixie’s steps,” said Larman, now moving back to their car. “We know her car is back here, and from the bags in the back seat, she apparently was in this car at one time late today.”

Rod couldn’t sleep during the night. He kept turning and getting up to pace around his apartment. Occasionally, he would hit the speed dial on his phone to call Mixie, but there was no answer other than the recorded message.

First thing in the morning he drove down to the hairdressers and talked to the proprietor to see if he could get information about Mixie’s whereabouts, or at least her expressed intentions for yesterday afternoon. The proprietor wasn’t helpful in that she could only say that Mixie left with another woman who had stopped to purchase some shampoo, paying cash. She didn’t know the name of the woman, but Mixie seemed to be her friend, and was anxious to leave with her. If I could only think of the name Mixie gave me on the phone, thought Rod.

When Rod and Larman were able to get into Mixie’s apartment with the detectives and crime scene personnel the next morning, it appeared that Mixie had made it home to her condo and had changed into something other than what she was wearing during the earlier part of the day. Rod remembered her outfit from their earlier ride, and the clothes were slung over a chair next to her bed. There was no sign of struggle in the condo, and no evidence of any forced entry.

Larman went back to his new rented house, where he now lived, but returned to Mixie’s condo within an hour to report further to Rod, who had stayed in front of Mixie’s unit.

“Called the firm, talked to Schalter, gave him all the facts re the disappearance, and our progress generally down here,” said Larman. “We talked about retaining several of our private boys to immediately investigate Mixie’s situation, and Schalter left that decision to me.”

Rod knew that Larman was referring to Jim Schalter, the recently elected Chairman of the Firm of Kellog & Hood. The disappearance of one of the firm's promising young associates on a case in Georgia was not publicity the firm encouraged. Rod assumed that no reasonable expense would be spared to keep this matter quiet, but also to find the associate as soon as possible.

Boy, this case is starting to really blow up, thought Rod. The investigation, which a few weeks ago seemed to be falling into place, now seem to have exploded all over the landscape. Rod couldn't keep track of who was who, and who wanted the formula, and who wanted it destroyed or hidden. For all he knew, there were a number of factions who hadn't even surfaced yet, and he worried that the magnificent and omniscient Larman Kingfund might be losing control at this point, too.

Rod needed to drive around, as many thoughts were going through his head. He saw from his phone messages that Gerri had called, and he was anxious to see her again. There were two calls from his secretary at the firm in New York, and several messages from Brad Soppenburg's secretary at his Calhoun law office. He needed to return these calls, but his mind was solely on Mixie and her plight at this point. He drove down into the center of the city, and then out to the east toward the interstate. What had he missed that could leave a clue to follow? How great it would be to see Mixie walking along the sidewalk, he thought, as he peered along the side of the road.

The next several days were excruciating for Rod. He drove around, endlessly thinking of ways to find Mixie, without success. Then, while downtown, he stopped in to see Detective Lonebird. The two men met in the detective's office, which was smaller than the one Rod had in New York. There was something Rod liked about Detective Lonebird, but he couldn't figure out exactly what it was. The detective was a man of few words and seemed to use silence as a way to trigger a nervous reaction from anyone he was interviewing. It forced the conversation to be one-sided, thought Rod. There seemed a need to fill the silence with additional information.

Today was different, however, in that the detective was adding information. He reached down into his bottom drawer of his desk and pulled up a piece of paper from a file. It appeared to be a photocopy of the feather which appeared on the note left under the wiper in Mixie's car.

"You know, Mr. Larren," said Detective Lonebird, "I do recognize this picture. It's a symbol sometimes used by the Brotherhood. It was left for a reason, and I know enough about the Brotherhood to understand that it does not leave these clues for no reason."

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Rod sat up in his chair, recognizing that Detective Lonebird had made some progress in his new case. "So, you have determined that the Brotherhood is responsible for kidnapping Mixie?"

"Possibly, but not for sure," answered Detective Lonebird. "If it is the Brotherhood, leaving this obvious clue to its identity at Ms. Cooper's car would indicate to me that the group does not intend to harm her."

Hearing the detective's opinion was relief to Rod, though he understood it was merely a theory by Detective Lonebird.

The detective left his chair and walked to the small window across his office. He seemed to be thinking of what to tell Rod, or perhaps he realized he might have told him more than necessary. Rod felt uncomfortable from the silence and wondered if he should speak. He looked around the detective's office, something he had not done before. On the far wall next to the window Rod noticed a mural of what appeared to be Indian art, and several pieces of pottery on a small bookcase against the side wall.

Detective Lonebird returned to his chair, and sat down, staring at Rod.

"I have had some connection with the Brotherhood, since a relative of mine was a member, I believe. They are adamant in their beliefs about preserving the Cherokee relics and customs, though many have died off over the last twenty years. The younger ones, who are descendants to some of the original society, are few in number, but very dedicated."

"But why would they kidnap Mixie?" asked Rod.

Detective Lonebird seemed to ignore Rod's question. He continued with his train of thought, which Rod realized was in midstream.

"There is one predominant theme which I believe the Brotherhood still harbors. Again, Mr. Larren, there are very few members of the Brotherhood. I have no actual knowledge at this point as to who they are. I do have contacts in the community, however."

Rod asked, "What is the theme, detective?"

"There is an old legend among the local Cherokee community about gohida ama, a substance which stops, or perhaps reverses aging. I know you and your friend, Mixie, have been connected with the search for that substance. As you know, there was a murder a number of months ago of a Mrs. Satterly, and since that time there have been new rumors about gohida ama."

Rod felt he must be quiet about his motivations, and he wished that Larman were with him. On the other hand, he was frantic to find Mixie, and he felt Detective Lonebird might be the only avenue to make progress in the case.

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“We have a client, detective, who has given us information about the substance, as you describe. It might be a long shot, but finding such a formula would be valuable, of course.”

“Valuable?” said Detective Lonebird, with a troubled look on his face. “That is the point, Mr. Larren,”

“The point?” said Rod.

“I understand from a close relative that the Brotherhood will do everything possible to make sure that the formula is not disclosed in its entirety. There is strong belief among the Cherokee that its disclosure will not be valuable to the world, but will lead to the devastation of the world, as we know it.”

Rod listened intently. From the detective’s last comment, Rod surmised that Detective Lonebird knew more than he was enumerating. He obviously had some knowledge about the details of the Cherokee legend.

“You need to tell me everything you know about gohida ama,” said Detective Lonebird. “I need all information available if we are going to find your friend.”

Rod felt discomfort now. He had certain confidentiality requirements for the firm’s client, but he knew it was essential to give the police enough information to find Mixie quickly. Was Detective Lonebird directly connected with the Brotherhood? It certainly was possible, thought Rod. Would giving detailed information to the detective substantiate information for the Brotherhood? Rod looked around the room, stalling while he tried to compose his thoughts. Maybe I should talk to Larman, he finally concluded.

“Detective Lonebird, I know very little about gohida ama. It’s correct that we have been investigating whether the substance existed or not. We have a client who is willing to pay for our work here. Unfortunately, we’re a long way from determining whether it exists, or whether it is just part of a fictional legend.”

Detective Lonebird appeared disappointed. “That’s unfortunate,” he responded, rising from his chair again. He held out his hand to Rod. “Let me know if you hear anything whatsoever about your friend. We will do everything from here to locate her as quickly as possible.”

Rod left the detective’s office and headed for his car. That was a strange meeting, he thought. Detective Lonebird seems like a conscientious public servant, mused Rod, but his connection with the Cherokee community and his direct knowledge of the Brotherhood created a strange twist to this investigation.

Rod headed over to Larman’s house for further consultation. Larman was completing a call when Rod arrived. His boss seemed to have more concern

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than normal and appeared to be somewhat disheveled. Rod perceived the senior partner had little sleep the night before.

Larman smiled, as Rod approached. "Rod, any news?" he asked.

"Had a further talk with Detective Lonebird this morning," responded Rod.

"Well, I got a note delivered to my room this morning, without signature," said Larman.

"What did it say?" asked Rod, pulling up a chair to the table.

Larman pulled a sheet of paper from a file on the top of his breakfast table. He handed it to Rod.

Rod read the typed note:

"Larman Kingfund,

The young lady is in our custody. We do not wish to harm her, and she will be treated well. The lady will be released upon delivery to us of the first three steps of the formula. You know what we mean. Please signify your agreement by placing a white flag on your young associate's red automobile radio antenna. We will be back to you in due time."

"So Mixie's disappearance and gohida ama are connected," blurted out Rod, handing the note back to Larman.

"Apparently, yes," he responded. "I'm interested in how they knew we had the first three steps of the formula. They must have gotten the information from Claire Winnona up in Pennsylvania. And my guess is that they are the Brotherhood, or related in some way."

"Have you given that information to Detective Lonebird?" asked Rod.

"Yes, I had talked to the firm's chairman in New York, and he has directed me to cooperate with the police, since Mixie's welfare is paramount to him."

"But Larman, would you give them the three steps of the formula?"

"I'm tending to say yes, Rod. I've given it a lot of thought, and we have copies of the steps, even if we give them the original sheets we got from Claire Winnona. The only problem, of course, is that it will give them information as to what we know."

Rod quickly responded, "But Larman, if it is the Brotherhood who has Mixie, my impression from Detective Lonebird is that they don't want the formula and are adamant on keeping it hidden for all times. What would they gain from getting the three steps of the formula from us?"

Larman thought for a moment and then responded, "I have thought long about that question Rod, and my best guess is that they are using this tactic to determine how much we know, and then they can determine what steps of the formula are outstanding. When they believe they know our progress, they can concentrate on stopping further disclosures."

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Rod leaned toward Larman. “But how can they trust that we will give them all we know?”

“I assume,” responded Larman, “that they know for sure that we have the three steps of the formula. They probably suspect that we haven’t broken the code. Claire Winnona assured us, and I trust her, that she gave us the only copies of the three steps, leaving her with no further connection to gohida ama. Taken together, these assumptions make me believe we are the center of the Brotherhood’s current focus.”

Rod said, “What if these kidnappers really want to find the formula, and not keep it hidden?”

Larman answered, “Son, there are probably a number of very well-financed groups looking for these formula steps now. It’s possible the feather on the sheet was for misdirection, and someone else has Mixie.”

“Some other party might have different objectives,” said Rod.

“That may be,” said Larman, “but I’m going to cooperate. Let’s get that white flag on the radio antenna.”

“Not waiting for Detective Lonebird?” asked Rod.

“Detective Lonebird has deep connections in the Cherokee descendants here in the area. I thought we might proceed without him and see what we can accomplish. At this point, I don’t know whether he is friend or foe.”

“Sounds dangerous, Larman,” Rod answered, looking at him.

“I think we’ll bring Lonebird into it shortly, but we need to play it out quickly ourselves,” said Larman. “And I’ve cleared it with Professor Hippa, though he’s concerned over the possibility that this group could beat us to the formula.”

The two men stared at each other for a moment, perhaps looking for another possible course of action.

Finally, Rod jumped from his chair, and said, “I’ll stop at the Dollar Store down the road and buy the towel. It’ll be up in thirty minutes. There must be someone following us who will see it.”

“Maybe a lot of people. Some may be highly dangerous,” added Larman. It appeared Larman already had several Bloody Marys that morning.

###

Chapter Eleven

The Recovery

Rod parked his car in several prominent locations with the towel on the antenna. He doubted whether the exercise was necessary, since both Larman and he figured they were being watched closely. Then the call came, about four o'clock. Rod pulled out his cell phone from his jacket. It was Mixie.

She was calm and said she had been taken by two men from in front of her condominium, but they had treated her well, though she was blindfolded during the travel. Mixie was at a rural location, but had no idea where she was. Her captives wore ski masks, but were well mannered, and let her roam in the small room where she was taken. Her mission now was to tell Rod to bring the formula steps with him to a location she would describe, and to leave the paper in a certain roadside mailbox north of the city. It seemed so amateurish to Rod. Why go to all of this trouble to get these copies, he thought. He certainly was coming around to Larman's thinking about giving up the three steps, since Larman was losing nothing regarding the formula. There was the long shot that these steps were the missing steps sought by the Brotherhood, or some other group, who might have the other two steps.

Mixie expressed the view on the phone that the men holding her would free her after they had obtained the formula steps, but Rod was not as sure. On the other hand, what choice did he and Larman have? After receiving the first instruction from Mixie, Rod called Larman, and the two agreed to have Rod deliver the copies of the three formula steps according to the instructions he received.

The written instructions to find the drop off mailbox would come sequentially, Mixie had explained, and Rod would need to drive to the location described in the current direction in order to find the next instruction. Rod realized that he would be observed during this treasure hunt to make sure he wasn't being followed. Rod proceeded exactly according to the instructions. He looked around as he drove, knowing some representative of the captors was focused on his vehicle. The Brotherhood, if it was the Brotherhood, didn't use sophisticated methods, but the simplistic approach was working, thought Rod. Finally, he arrived at a mailbox approximately fifteen miles north of the city. It

was at the edge of a wooded area, and Rod opened it to find the next instruction for this crazy trip around Calhoun. There was nothing in the mailbox. As he closed the front of the box, his cell phone rang. It was Mixie, with the last instruction. She conveyed the last direction to Rod. He was to place the sheets with the formula steps into the box, close the front, and then drive away down the road. Rod followed the instructions exactly and sped off towards the city. He knew the box would be emptied in seconds.

Now it was just a waiting game for Rod. He reported back to Larman, who now was meeting with Detective Lonebird, but not disclosing the current circumstances pertaining to his young female associate. Rod peered at his phone to make sure that the battery was still strong, but he figured he should return to his apartment and recharge the phone, just in case. He wanted it ready to go for any calls tonight.

Then came the call. It was from Mixie, and she said she'd been left at a strip mall, just north of the city center. Rod jumped into his car and headed for the location. This seems like a crazy scheme to get those formula steps, he thought. It's almost like working with some amateur operatives, not any professional group, Rod believed, as he pulled up alongside of the curb. There was Mixie, sitting on a bench at the bus stop. She seemed to be calm and stood up and walked to the car.

"Thanks for the ride," she said with a smile.

Rod stared at her. Had she been out for a movie?

"I hope I don't have that experience again," she said smiling at Rod as she jumped into the car. He saw a few minor bruises on her shoulder, but generally she seemed like nothing had happened. The two talked about her experience as Rod drove back to her condominium.

"Don't know who these guys were," she said, "except they seemed more scared than I was, wearing those dark glasses and handkerchiefs over their faces most of the time. Funny part was that they took off the handkerchiefs when they ate, but tried to hide their faces. It was humorous, that's for sure. I think I scared them more than they scared me."

"Did they rough you up at all?"

"No, not at all. They were very polite. Were young, probably in their twenties. They kept looking around all the time, and we moved from place to place. They seemed more afraid of someone following them. I had the feeling some guys were after them. They kept talking to a boss on the cell phone."

"Do you want me to stay with you for a while?" asked Rod.

"No, no need. I want to take a shower. Probably you should tell Larman, and he can let the police know the details. It's sort of anti-climactic at this point."

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Rod looked at her as she left his car. Did she think he wouldn't let Larman know about her return, or was she still toying with him? In any event, it was nice to get her back, though her moods were always somewhat unpredictable. He pulled out his cell phone again and gave Larman a full report. Larman showed great relief.

Mixie's comments weighed on his mind as he drove several blocks to his apartment. This situation here in Calhoun is getting involved, he said to himself. The existence of the first three steps of the formula seems like information being shared in various quarters. And Rod now knew the Brotherhood is only one problem. There are a bunch of people looking for the other two steps of the formula and a code reader to make sense of it all. Rod also realized the other players were getting more desperate, and others might be a great deal more professional than this Brotherhood group; and possibly much more violent.

When Rod reached Larman several hours later, Larman appeared totally revived. Rod knew his boss was greatly relieved with Mixie's return, and he surmised that Larman had found the bar at the hotel again.

"Rod, I'm having dinner with Senator Eddelburg and Banion Catorre this evening. Would you like to join us? It could be quite entertaining."

After a quick shower, Rod slipped on a blue shirt and jacket, and headed for the hotel. In the distance he could see a blond in a black cocktail dress sitting in the lobby as he approached the dining area. It was Mixie. She wouldn't miss a dinner like this, Rod knew, but how did she find out so quickly and get herself down to the hotel before him? Mixie was a mystery; he knew that for sure.

The two of them headed into the dining room, but suddenly a loud voice called, "Mr. Larren, over this way." It was Senator Eddelburg. Rod was flattered that the senator knew his name.

The senator, Banion Catorre, the counsel and vice president of Alliance Pharmaceuticals, and Larman sat around a large round table in the corner of the hotel bar. There were a few empty glasses on the table already, so Rod knew he was expected to be a little tardy. The senator jumped up, and pulled out the chair for Mixie, forcing Rod to obtain a chair from an adjacent empty table. The discussion, which was interrupted upon Mixie's arrival, now started again.

Banion Catorre, looking at Larman, continued, "Yes, as we were discussing, my company Alliance Pharmaceuticals has made a major investment of time and money here in Calhoun. We believe there is some truth to the Cherokee legend about the Fountain of Youth potion, and we haven't been deterred to date. When Mrs. Satterly came to the company, it was sort of laughed off, but our investigation made us more interested. Unfortunately, we are convinced that several other companies are here undercover, looking for the same thing. And

that Brotherhood, can't tell if they are friend or foe. Some have told us they want to 'deep six' the formula; others say they want to cash in. Can't get a handle on it."

"Do you know who killed Mrs. Satterly?" asked Larman.

"Expect it was the Brotherhood, but word around here is that the police are soft on the Brotherhood, so nothing has happened," responded Banion.

"Well, I'm certainly rooting for Alliance to find that potion formula," said Senator Eddelburg. They are one of my most significant constituents, of course, but I have a personal stake in this all. As you gentlemen know, I have a terminal condition, and when I talked to Banion several months ago at a fundraising event, I was intrigued with this possibility."

Rod understood Banion Catorre's involvement, but he was somewhat puzzled with the senator spending so much time here in Calhoun. He wondered what strings the senator was pulling for the company in order to expedite their investigation and subsequently to secure all of the extremely lucrative intellectual property rights in gohida ama. The senator would not need many more contributors to his campaign with Alliance on his side, but then again, Rod thought, would there be another campaign without a discovery of the formula?

Banion continued, "You know, Larman, we aren't sure who your client is at this point, but your firm is certainly well known in our industry. We figure it could be one of a number of big pharmaceutical companies, since the secret of gohida ama got spread to a small group in the industry by Mrs. Satterly. Until then, it had been a pretty good secret, and was considered Cherokee fiction, at best. The untimely death of Mrs. Satterly was a shock to us, but it closed down the pipeline of information with each of several companies knowing some of the story."

"I'm surprised that with all of your resources, you haven't pieced the puzzle together," Rod interjected.

"We know there are five steps to the formula, and we're aware it is written in Cherokee code. We also know that some of the steps have come to the surface," continued Banion, looking directly at Larman. "The identity of the other two holders of the formula steps is still a mystery to us."

Rod was surprised how forthcoming Banion was to this group of several strangers, and he wasn't sure how much the senator and Banion had talked with Larman before he and Mixie arrived.

Larman, who had remained silent during this part of the conversation, finished his Manhattan, held up the glass to the waitress, and looked back at Banion. "Banion recognizes that we have some vital information which he needs, or which I don't believe he has. He's also worried about some of the

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people we perceive are becoming involved in this matter, since criminal involvement is highly probable. As I understand it, Banion is concerned that the possibilities of finding the other holders of the formula steps may never occur. Am I accurate there, Banion?"

Banion nodded, now holding his empty glass in the air, waving at the waitress. "Yes, that's basically correct. That's why I'm suggesting the possibility of some form of partnership in these efforts," he said with a broad smile.

Senator Eddelburg nodded to Larman, and held up his glass, suggesting a toast of some sort.

"And what would that partnership entail?" asked Larman. Rod now understood this point was the farthest the men had discussed before he arrived. He looked at Mixie, and she was staring at Banion, apparently trying to catch up to what was happening. Larman seemed mellow and was not flustered by the sudden suggestion from Banion.

"Your client, Larman," Banion said, "apparently knows a substantial amount about this gohida ama, and I assume understands the science of the reversal of aging to some extent. I don't know if this client is a large corporation, or a small group of scientists or businessmen. In any event, it would seem that the resources of Alliance would add much to the mix, and the information you can provide us will expedite our investigation."

"I assume we would need a written agreement to the terms, if my client would agree," responded Larman, looking over at Mixie. "And would the profits be split evenly, with any rights to the ultimate formula being divided according?"

Banion started to squirm in his seat. He looked over at Senator Eddelburg, and the two men communicated silently. Then Banion grabbed a pretzel and turned back to Larman. "That can wait for another day. In the meantime, let us pursue the possibilities, and we can enhance your client's return, if there is a return for anyone here."

The night evolved, and all parties were in good humor when they separated at around ten. Rod knew he wasn't driving anywhere, and he called a cab for Larman and himself. Mixie was adamant that she would drive home, and eventually she did, even after Rod protested her ability to do so. It was a strange evening, thought Rod, as he rode home in the back of the cab.

All of a sudden Banion was proposing a partnership. Rod wondered what Larman was thinking, and more importantly, what Professor Hippa would think.

And there was something about Banion that made Rod feel danger. He just didn't trust the man at this point. During the evening, Rod had studied Banion, and watched his face, and observed the glances between Banion and the senator. Banion was heavysset, but not obese. He wore black glasses and had a silver

Richard Dodge Davidson

streak along the sides of his hair. The man looked sharp in his pressed business casual slacks, and carried a gold fountain pen in his shirt pocket.

As Rod got out of his car at his apartment, another thought came to him. Who were these other groups who Banion said were undercover around Calhoun. And his reference to the possible danger from these groups, all added to the confusion of the situation. The relentless pursuers in Pennsylvania around the Winnona residence were no amateurs, and Rod had no idea which faction they represented.

When Rod entered his apartment, he was alarmed to find someone sitting on his couch.

###

Chapter Twelve

Code Talker

Detective Lonebird rose and turned to Rod as he walked into the apartment.

“Sorry to startle you, Rod. Your landlord let me in, when I showed my badge. I’m not looking for anything, so I think you would agree that I don’t need any search warrant. Just a few questions.”

Rod tried to determine if the detective was irritated about Rod’s tardy message disclosing Mixie’s return. Detective Lonebird didn’t mention it. And he was calling Rod by his first name; that was a change. Was there a reason?

Detective Lonebird continued, “There is much whispering in the Cherokee community that you and your associates have found the first three formula steps, and if this is true, your lives may be in danger. I don’t want any more murders here in Calhoun, so I’m trying to either verify your intentions here or get you to leave our community.”

“Our intentions are certainly peaceful, detective, but I will let my boss, Larman Kingfund, speak for us in that regard. We do have a project here for a client, and it has not been completed.”

“I will be talking to Mr. Kingfund shortly, Rod, and I will ask him the same questions I am asking you. But let me give you this advice. It’s better to tell me where you and Larman stand so we can avoid another kidnapping of your associate, or worse.”

“Or worse?” said Rod, generally knowing what Detective Lonebird was saying.

The detective got up from the couch again, and turned to Rod. “Yes, and worse,” he said. There was a young man named Alan Morningstar killed last night down by the river. Don’t know if he was in the Brotherhood, but he has been linked to the organization in the past. He might be involved in some other way, I don’t know. But what I do know is the gohida ama project here has some serious contestants, and I’d rather not have your body wash up next.”

Rod could see the detective was becoming somewhat agitated. He started to ask Detective Lonebird another question but stopped. He needed to talk to Larman before volunteering more information to the police.

Detective Lonebird excused himself, but Rod knew the detective was not letting this matter drop anytime soon. As he closed his apartment door behind the departing detective, Rod thought about Gerri, and his need for a little relaxation. Rod pulled out his cell phone and hit the speed dial for his sometime girlfriend to set up a date for the evening.

It was nice to be with Gerri again. She always was flirtatious with him, though he knew she had several other boyfriends; perhaps even a steady boyfriend at this point. And Mixie, she had been distant since her return, which was confusing to Rod. Perhaps I should have made a bigger production about her harrowing experience, he thought.

“Rod, I saw a police report in the paper last week that your friend Mixie was missing,” Gerri said. “I assume she got back safely?”

“Oh, yes, very safely. It’s been resolved,” Rod said, without glancing from the magazine he was reading at the local Italian restaurant, *La Vecchi*. This place was a hangout for the ‘twenty crowd’ in the city, and Gerri seemed to know everyone around, including the proprietor. Rod was feeling out of place, but wasn’t sure where he would feel better.

“That’s nice,” said Gerri, with a giggle. “My father said there’d been a great deal of crime in the Cherokee community, and wondered whether you and your associates were involved.”

Rod poured himself a glass of wine from the bottle on the table. Gerri was drinking from her glass.

“I heard that someone was killed the other night.”

Gerri would not let up, seeming very interested in the topic. “My father heard you were looking for gohida ama.”

Rod jolted back slightly, and then looked up at Gerri. “Where did he hear that?”

Gerri responded, “At work they were talking about the murder of Mrs. Satterly, and one of the janitors said that the existence of gohida ama was not really just a legend, but a number of people were in town to find it, and there was a group to stop them.”

“And he mentioned my name?” said Rod, with some appearance of surprise.

“Yes, Rod, and I believe it, too. You didn’t just show up here for no reason, did you?”

“No, I came here because I heard you lived in Calhoun,” he said with a chuckle.

She ignored the last comment, or at least felt she would not reward it with acknowledgement. “My father says you better watch out. Certain people won’t let the formula go.”

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What surprised Rod was that Gerri's father seemed to know of gohida ama. Perhaps it was not the secret he envisioned, thought Rod.

Gerri put her fork down on her plate and looked at Rod. She touched his hand. "Rod, do you love your associate, Mixie?"

The question came out of the blue. Rod knew he must answer definitively.

"I think highly of Ms. Cooper," he answered with a certain touch of confusion.

Immediately, Rod regretted using the awkward formality, which seemed unnatural and indicative of some stress from the question. Gerri looked at him for a moment, and then turned away.

"Well, I'm certainly infatuated with you, Rod, and I'll be happy to take my turn."

Rod felt embarrassed, and said, "Gerri, I have no romantic connection with Mixie; she's a business associate of mine. We joke around together from time to time, that's all. You're my favorite companion, you know that."

Gerri looked up at Rod with a slight smirk on her face. "And I will try to keep that status," she said, but Rod could sense the coldness of her quip.

"Oh, come on now, Gerri, don't be a party pooper," said Rod, trying to change the mood of the discussion. "Mixie is a rival, she tries to best me in everything. She only flirts with me to gain an advantage," Rod said, continuing to try to slip out of the conversation with a certain grace. It was difficult.

"Of course, that is the case. She's very beautiful though," responded Gerri, with slightly raised eyebrows.

"You are very beautiful, girlfriend," said Rod, raising his glass of wine. Hopefully that would end the conversation, thought Rod. And it did, for the moment.

Suddenly, Rod's cell phone rang in his pocket. He debated whether to answer it, and then finally relented. "Larren, here," he said into the phone. "Larman, what did you say?"

Rod looked up at Gerri. She had a mock look of frustration. "No business now," she said to Rod, in a low voice.

Rod listened to the other end of the call. Then he said, looking away, "Yes, Larman, I'll be right there."

It was awkward, that's for sure. Luckily, on the way out of the restaurant, Gerri spotted some of her friends from college, and they all headed out to one of the clubs. "I thought she would be more upset," said Rod to himself, as he left the restaurant. He slid into his front seat and headed towards Larman's house. He checked the side view and rear-view mirrors several times, and could see the same headlights behind him as he drove across the city. It seemed clear

now that someone was following him, but anyone could find Larman if they wanted to find him.

But it was eerie, thought Rod. Lately, everywhere he went he felt like someone, or possible groups of people, were following him, ready to pounce if he found anything of value. One could get paranoid, he mused. But Rod realized the stakes were high here, especially if there was any truth in this Cherokee legend.

When Rod arrived at Larman's house, Mixie was seated at the table on the deck, where Larman was enjoying the weather by eating most of his meals outside. Rod could see another man at the table, with his back towards him.

When Rod came up to the table after climbing the stairs to the deck, he saw that the man was Detective Lonebird. The detective rose and held out his hand to Rod.

"Rod, nice to see you again, so soon," said Detective Lonebird. Larman brought over a drink to Rod, and the four of them sat down to continue the discussion.

"Detective Lonebird says he's getting some further intelligence on our matter," said Larman, nodding at the detective. "He says that there's much unrest in the Cherokee community, and many of the elders are taking sides between disclosing the formula and destroying the formula forever."

"I didn't know that many people around here even knew about the formula; how can it be talk in the community?" asked Rod.

"It has mushroomed around here in the last week, Rod," responded the detective. "There were only a very select few who knew anything, namely the holders of the five steps of the formula, and maybe one or two descendants from the early Cherokee council. When rumors started flying, the word rapidly spread, since no one wanted to be left out being able to voice an opinion. It's still under the covers around the community, but it's spreading fast."

"At this point," interjected Mixie, "it seems that no secret can be discovered unless the last two people holding the actual final steps of the formula come forward."

"They may never come forward, maybe they're dead or lost interest," added Larman.

"Do you think their lives are in danger?" asked Rod, looking at Detective Lonebird.

Before the detective could answer, Larman said, "I'm not sure we need to worry about two people still holding the last two steps of the formula. If my understanding is correct, each of the remaining holders of a step has the information of the other holder as a backup protecting against loss of the

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information. If one is killed or missing, the other would have the information for both final steps of the formula.”

“Precisely,” said Mixie. “That would complete the formula if only one would come public.”

“No, not exactly,” responded Larman. “Don’t forget we know each of the steps has information written in the old Cherokee code, used during the world wars in Europe. To finally get the entire formula in a usable form, you would need the fourth or fifth holder plus a code talker to translate everything.”

Detective Lonebird said, “Yes, the code talker is an area which I might help you. I take no position on this gohida ama, or its formula, but I want to get this search done once and for all. It’s very dangerous for the community.”

Larman set his coffee on the table. Now he was interested in the conversation.

“You know something about code talkers?” he asked.

Detective Lonebird responded, “I know nothing about the art itself, but I heard stories about people in this area who were in the Marines in World War II, and who used their knowledge of the Cherokee language to write and read code derived from the language. Most of the code talkers were from the Indian communities in the Oklahoma area, and I know of only one in this area, though there are rumors that the Brotherhood has several younger members who have acquired the skill from their fathers.”

“You do?” said Rod

“Yes, it’s my grandfather’s friend. I believe his name is Firerise, but I’m not positive. I received a letter several months ago from my grandfather, and he mentioned the man. It was part of the letter because my grandfather asked if the gohida ama matter had been resolved, since his friend was hiding away fearing personal harm. He must realize he holds the key to deciphering the code hiding the final steps of the formula. It’s possible he even had a hand in writing it back many years ago.”

“This is fabulous,” said Larman, as he rose from his chair. “This is the piece I was thinking was the game ender.”

Mixie said, “If this man reads the code, then the only outstanding piece would be to find one of the two remaining people holding a step in the formula, since each would have the remaining two steps.”

“Not so fast,” responded Detective Lonebird. “I know of the man from my grandfather. It won’t be easy to find him, since he is hiding. And even if you find him, it’s doubtful you’ll get him to cooperate. Among many of the old Cherokees there is a strong opposition to disclosing this formula. That’s of course, if there is a complete formula.”

“Oh, I think there is a formula,” said Larman. “I talked to our client this morning, and he thinks his continuing research indicates that a formula did exist at one time in this area of the Cherokee Nation.”

Rod wondered why Larman had made that statement, especially in the presence of Detective Lonebird.

Detective Lonebird took another sip of coffee, and then checked his watch. He seemed somewhat preoccupied. “The thing is that there is an element of danger here for that code talker. Everyone wants to get him and have him read the formula. There are those, I expect, that want to make sure he doesn’t read the formula. And there’s little I can do to protect this man.”

“Do you know where Johnny Firetree is hiding out?” asked Larman, as he took another sip of coffee. All three of the other people at the table looked at Larman.

“Detective Lonebird said his name was Firerise, I believe,” said Rod.

Detective Lonebird responded, “No, I believe Mr. Kingfund is correct. Apparently, my information is superfluous. You may know all of this already.”

“I didn’t know your grandfather had any connection with this man, but I knew the man existed. He’s the only one left who knows the code, that is the problem. I only know his name and that he lives in this area at last record because I had an associate back at our firm do some research into the code talkers. There was apparently a federal statute passed in 2008 that listed all of the code talkers and recognized them with some form of national medal. The surviving Cherokee code talker in Florida was this man, Johnny Firetree.”

“We need to talk to him,” said Mixie.

“That’s the problem,” said Larman. I have known his name for some time, but the last address for him is a nursing home in Chattanooga, but he walked out two months ago, and no one knows where he is.”

“Would your grandfather be able to help us find him?” asked Rod, looking over at Detective Lonebird.

“Perhaps, but he would need a good reason. I’m not sure he favors helping to expose the formula, but I think he figures the only way to protect his friend in the long term is to get this entire formula question out in the open, and the code read.”

“But of course, we cannot do that without the final formula steps,” said Mixie.

“No, but we need to discover how to ascertain the true step instructions from the code,” responded Larman.

“Well, I might be inclined to help find this man, but I won’t get involved in this search as a detective for Gordon County. I will take a few days off and see

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what I can find out as a private citizen. I'm definitely intrigued by this whole mystery of the formula, but I know there are hidden dangers under the surface."

Rod looked over at Mixie. He wondered if the detective was friend or foe, and whether his volunteering was for the purpose of aiding their project or for the purpose of providing some surveillance for some other group. Unfortunately, thought Rod, he may be our only hope to finding this code talker.

"I assume others have found this man's name. We will need to be careful that we don't lead some of our undisclosed competitors to Mr. Firetree," said Larman.

"My grandfather has told me that there have been a number of men asking questions around the area where this man is hiding, and he believes it will only be a matter of time before someone follows the trail to Firetree," said Detective Lonebird.

"We need to find this man first," said Larman, pushing out his chair and standing. "Rod and Mixie can meet with you and get information to find this Firetree. I need to meet with our friends from Alliance Pharmaceuticals and the good senator tonight to discuss further any joint efforts to find this formula. Banion Catorre tells me he has some written agreement he wants me to look over."

Detective Lonebird responded, "I will tell you what I know, but no one is trying to find and meet with Johnny Firetree without me being present. I'll be with you every step, but we'll need to find him in the next several days, since I'm not taking off more days than that."

Larman seemed pleased with the morning's progress. He was looking forward to lunch with the local poetry society, and then dinner with the senator and Banion to talk business.

Rod and Mixie agreed to meet Detective Lonebird at the local Wendy's in the morning for the first leg of the search for Johnny Firetree. It was an interesting turn of events, thought Rod. It was convenient that the detective had a grandfather who knew a surviving code talker in Florida. It was the coincidence that bothered Rod.

###

Chapter Thirteen

The Rural Visit

As Rod and Mixie drove to the Wendy's, as agreed, both watched the cars around them. They were starting to feel somewhat paranoid and imagined all of the cars and the people were following them. The news of the missing formula had now become big news in the city, especially among the Cherokee community, and the identity of the two young attorneys was no longer a secret. Rod still noticed the entries of incomprehensible letters and numbers in the classified section.

Their prior positions in the community were no longer relevant, and neither played the part at their respective offices anymore. The common meeting place was at Larman's newly rented house.

Detective Lonebird was waiting at the front of the restaurant and greeted the two young attorneys when they arrived, and the three ordered breakfast inside. They found a table in the back of the eating area, and each surveyed the people sitting in the vicinity of their location. There was a young family with two small children at the nearest point, but they didn't appear a threat to overhear the discussion. In any event, the three of them kept their voices low as they discussed the plans for the day.

After the initial pleasantries, Detective Lonebird said, "My grandfather lives alone just to the south of Dalton. He lives in a rural wooded area, and I'll need to show you the route. I have talked to him briefly last night, and he is willing to meet with us, if we come alone, and aren't followed.

"Will Johnny Firetree be with him?" asked Mixie.

"Oh no," answered the detective. "That is the second task. My grandfather is very protective of Johnny, and we'll need to figure a way to get his cooperation. Johnny is somewhere in the woods."

"...in the woods?" said Mixie, looking down at her high heels.

"Yes, but there are gravel and dirt roads in the area. You're good in your bare feet, aren't you?" asked Detective Lonebird, with a slight smile, looking at Rod.

Rod didn't laugh, but eventually realized that the detective was trying to lighten the mood.

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Rod said, "Do you mean we may have to go into the woods to find this man?"

"There's no helicopter landing areas in those woods," said the detective, now turning to light sarcasm.

"Will you be driving?" asked Rod, looking at Detective Lonebird, who was dressed in a knit shirt and khaki pants, showing no connection with the police.

Detective Lonebird answered, "The chances are very high that at least one or more groups who want to find this guy will try to follow us. I've seen some good candidates already in the parking lot. No, we're going to have to be a little more devious. We will both drive and have the capability to divert."

"Divert?" asked Rod.

Detective Lonebird reached down to a leather bag on the floor next to his chair, and pulled out two handheld radios. He handed one to Rod.

"Young man, this is your communication center; hang on to it. It's set at a local secret police frequency; so, don't fool with the dial. All you need to do is push the button on the side, hold the antenna on the top in a vertical position and call me. Nothing fancy."

Rod took the radio, looked it over, and then handed it to Mixie.

"Why do we need this?" he asked.

Detective Lonebird smiled. "Anyone who is following us surely has the technology to tap into our cell phone signals and intercept our conversation. This frequency will be quite a bit more difficult."

Mixie turned to the detective, "...But why do we need to go in separate cars and have all of this special radio equipment?"

"Very simple, we will head out together according to this map," said the detective.

"If I read this situation correctly, there will be some suspicious activity behind us, and the chances are excellent we'll have a sophisticated group tailing us. There might even be more than one."

"So, you want the ability to split up and confuse them?" asked Rod.

"Exactly," answered the detective. "I've done it before in undercover operations, and it can work very well."

"And we would communicate on these radios, I assume," added Mixie.

"But eventually we will need to get back together. Won't one of us bring the people trailing back to the place we meet?" asked Mixie.

"We may have to meet several times and mix the people in each car to confuse them," responded the detective. "Much of this will be ad lib. Then again, maybe we won't be followed at all. In any event, I want to make sure no one finds my grandfather, let alone Johnny."

The three of them left the restaurant and got into the respective vehicles. Detective Lonebird gave Mixie a copy of a map marking the first several stops on the projected trip to Dalton, with instructions to stop at each location, and a plan to mix the drivers between the vehicles. It sounded like fun to Mixie, who had been bored over the last several weeks, but Rod had more anxiety, since he was driving. Rod and Mixie followed the route on the map, turning left out of the exit to the restaurant. Detective Lonebird turned right, but each driver had the location of the first meeting. Rod stared out of his rearview mirror to see if anyone was following him. As he looked back, he saw a black car turn onto the road behind him. He couldn't tell if anyone was following the detective. Rod reached down to the seat and picked up the radio that Detective Lonebird had given him.

"Detective Lonebird, my guess is that someone in a black car is following us. It has made the three last turns which we have taken."

Detective Lonebird responded, and his voice came through a little static. "Can you tell if there is more than one vehicle following you? There doesn't seem to be anyone following me, but I'll need to take a few maneuvers before I am sure of it."

"Seems like only one," interjected Mixie, not wanting to be out of the action.

"Try to lose them before you get to our first meeting spot on the map. Try winding around some of the country roads," continued Detective Lonebird.

"Do you want me to drive?" asked Mixie. "I used to race with my brother back in Indiana."

"Indiana?" said Rod. "I thought you were from Texas."

"I spent some time in Texas," she said.

"Well, Mixie, my dear, I can race this car with the best of them. I only hope that Detective Lonebird has some pull if I get stopped for speeding."

With that, Rod hit the gas, and the car skidded around a turn on to a backstreet. He made some additional fast turns, but the maneuvers only established that they were being followed, and a very professional driver was driving the car behind. Mixie was now not as confident and was holding on for dear life from the handle above her head. Rod sped through a yellow light which was turning red, but that gave no relief, since the following car shot through the red light, almost broadsiding the intersecting traffic.

"Call the detective," yelled Rod, handing the radio to Mixie. He realized he wasn't going to lose these people easily. Mixie examined the radio for a second, and then pressed the side button.

"Detective Lonebird, we can't seem to lose them," she yelled into the radio.

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“Meet me at the first stop on the map,” responded Detective Lonebird from the other radio. Mixie gave Rod the instructions to reach the first destination point, and he slowed slightly knowing he was going to be followed the entire way. As they neared the first stop, Rod looked ahead and slowed the car, still seeing the black car about 500 feet behind him. Luckily there was a green SUV between them, but it would not be a buffer for long.

“Are we headed for that parking garage?” asked Rod, turning to Mixie, who was studying the map and instructions given to her by the detective.

“Appears so,” she answered, “and it looks like we need to loop around and park on the end of the second level ramp.”

Rod stopped, took a ticket, and proceeded up the ramp in the garage. He accelerated but noted in his rearview mirror that the black car had pulled into a parking space near the exit gate of the garage. Mixie pointed to the spot on the second-floor ramp, which she thought was the marked place for the rendezvous with Detective Lonebird. His car was nowhere to be seen. Rod pulled into the spot next to a red SUV with dark windows and a large decal on the side door stating, “Ballion’s Dutch Bakery”.

“Have we blown it?” asked Rod, now with some substantial perspiration on his forehead.

“We better get out and see if we can see the detective before those guys come this way,” answered Mixie. She was now taking the position of the leader of the group.

“Welcome to the bakery business,” came a voice from the SUV. Rod could see there was a man sitting in the driver’s seat. “Leave the keys in the car and stay low and hop into the back seat of this vehicle. We were sent by Lonebird.”

Mixie and Rod looked at each other, then they looked down the ramp. Seeing that the chase car remained down at the bottom, they followed instructions and slid into the adjacent SUV. Rod looked to the front seat. There were actually two men sitting there. As Rod closed the side door the man sitting in the front passenger seat slipped out of the side door and moved over to Rod’s car and dropped into the driver’s seat. Then Rod heard a noise behind him. At that moment he recognized a third person in this car, sitting behind them. It was a young woman.

“Please lean forward and allow Miss White to exit quickly,” said the man in the driver’s seat. Rod could now see the driver of this SUV was wearing a white hat, looking the part of a deliveryman. Mixie moved over, and the young woman behind her exited quickly, and moving low to the ground, entered the passenger side of Rod’s vehicle. Mixie looked over at the vehicle, as it pulled out of the parking place, and headed for the down ramp to exit the garage.

“Now lay down below the windows for a few minutes,” said the man from the driver’s seat. The SUV turned slowly up the ramp, heading for the top of the garage. “Any discomfort will only be temporary,” said the voice from the front, and the SUV reached the top of the garage, and then headed down the several floors to the exit.

Can this work? thought Rod. It seems so simple, but what do I know?

“I would stay down for a while, kids, until I’m sure we aren’t being followed,” said the driver.

“We’re not kids,” protested Mixie. Rod only smiled. It was nice to have a little help when needed.

“Are you on the police force with Detective Lonebird?” Rod asked.

“No, we’re working with Larman Kingfund. He volunteered our assistance to Detective Lonebird, and we thought it was nice to get a little extra overtime,” said the driver.

“Larman?” said Mixie.

“He’s always involved,” said Rod, with a chuckle. “Let’s just sit back and enjoy it.”

Mixie was pouting and decided to change the subject. “I’ll miss the cotillion back in the city this weekend,” she said.

“That will give some of the girls a better chance,” responded Rod, looking away from his crouched position in the second seat behind the driver.

“The men deserve me,” she said, with her characteristic smirk. They both felt a little better now, though each knew the day was going to be a lot longer.

The driver turned upon a back road and into a warehouse. The black SUV stopped, and the man in the front said, “Here we are. You can get up now. Detective Lonebird is parked over in the side lane. Rod jumped up, saw the detective’s car, and Detective Lonebird standing beside it. He picked up his radio which was on the car floor, and he and Mixie headed for the other car. The detective waved to the driver of the SUV as Mixie, Rod and the detective headed north to find the grandfather.

“That was easy, I guess,” said Detective Lonebird, after a few seconds of silence as he drove away.

“Yup,” said Rod, “What’s the next easy step in this search?”

Mixie looked out the window, but Rod could see she was upset. Detective Lonebird looked in the rearview mirror at his two passengers and said nothing more for the next several miles.

Detective Lonebird, breaking the silence, said, “Hang on. The next five miles are on some back roads, and they aren’t the smooth byways you’re probably used to.”

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“We’ve done a lot of driving on Long Island,” said Rod, looking at Mixie. She looked back, but didn’t smile. Rod wondered why she was upset with him, but finally concluded that was just her way today.

This was not Long Island, Rod soon realized. It was a dark forest area, and the road was some gravel but mostly potholes. Mixie was holding the top of the front seat with both hands, and bouncing from side to side.

Detective Lonebird, chuckled out loud, and said, “Take me seriously, next time.”

The car turned into a path, not paved in any way. It was just two dirt tracks, and it led through some high bushes, and then up a hill along a wooded ridge. At the far end, Rod could see a cabin, and a shed at the side. There were no vehicles he could observe around the building.

“It looks like no one’s home,” he said, looking at Mixie.

“How so?” asked Detective Lonebird, “Gramps has no wheels.”

They parked next to the house and walked over to the front door of the house. It was a small structure with what appeared to be bark shingles on the roof, and the windows were partially covered with boards. Several vines crept along the corners of the one-story house.

Rod had his tape recorder in his hand, and Mixie carried a small bag with electronic devices hanging from her shoulder.

A penetrating noise sent Rod reeling off the step where he was standing. Mixie gave out a scream, and Detective Lonebird dropped to the ground while pulling a handgun from his coat. Part of the roof over the door fell to the ground, apparently from a projectile that just hit about two feet above their heads.

A second loud noise followed, and Rod could see some of the shingles over the door fall to the side. This impact was a foot closer to where they had been standing.

“Get on the ground,” yelled the detective.

Had the detective’s circuitous diversion plan failed? wondered Rod, and he strained to see the location of the shooter. Mixie darted behind a rain barrel sitting at the side of the porch, as Detective Lonebird slid over behind part of the foundation of the adjacent shed. He peered around the opening of the forest to find the source of the danger. Rod thought about dashing to the car, but his fear froze him in place, which unfortunately was still in the open.

After a minute of silence, Detective Lonebird jumped up and darted toward the front of the house in front of the right window. He slid to the side of the window and peered between two large boards partially hiding the view through the opening. He then glanced in the other direction, looking across the inner

room. The detective darted to a place on the ground behind the wooden porch structure.

Then he called out in a loud voice, "Gramps, you old fool, this is your grandson."

A voice yelled back from the forest area, "What's that? Say again."

"It's your grandson with a few friends. It's Jack. Come on over," yelled Detective Lonebird, this time considerably louder.

Several seconds passed. Then a small man in overalls and a red plaid shirt walked from the forest, carrying a shotgun. "Why didn't ya tell me when yur comin, Jack," he said as he approached. "Ya skare a man, and I'm jumpy as is," said the elderly man, now recognized by Rod to be the detective's grandfather. After introductions by Detective Lonebird, the group entered the house and into a small room, somewhat cluttered with clothing and gear, apparently discarded without organization.

Detective Lonebird explained to his grandfather that his companions were looking for Johnny Firetree, and would not harm him. The detective seemed very persuasive to Rod, making the argument to his grandfather that the sooner Johnny talks to them about his ability to read code, the safer it would be for him. The grandfather appeared to understand, but said nothing. He smoked a corn pipe, and sat in a small rocking chair, looking out the window.

Finally, after a period of silence, he turned to his grandson, and said, "I'm not shur what Johnny wants."

"Can we go find Johnny, and ask him?" said Mixie. The grandfather turned and stared at her, but said nothing. Rod looked over at Detective Lonebird, hoping that the detective would have a way to find Johnny.

Then the grandfather turned to his grandson and said, "Jack, yur all I have, and I tros you. Let me see if I can talk to Johnny. I'll have ma neighbor call ya when I've takked to em."

Rod felt disappointment, since it didn't appear they would get to talk to Johnny on this trip. He turned to Detective Lonebird, and asked, "But will your grandfather be safe, until we can come and talk to him again, and find his friend?" Detective Lonebird didn't respond, but looked at his grandfather and then stared out the window.

"It will have to suffice," he said. He gave his grandfather a hug, and walked to the door. "We will be back, and talk to your friend. It is important for our people," said the detective.

"Are we just going to leave?" asked Mixie, as the three got into the car.

"Yes, that is our only option," said Detective Lonebird, sounding somewhat disappointed, himself. "But at least we know we have a contact through my

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grandfather. If, and when, you find the rest of the steps of the formula, we will have something for Johnny to look at. At the end of the day, I think my grandfather will help us.”

Rod thought they'd been through quite a bit that day, and had very little to show for it. But as Detective Lonebird said, it gave them some hope that the code could be deciphered if they ever found the missing steps.

Rod rested his head back on the top of the car seat. He was exhausted. He glanced over at Mixie, who was fast asleep on the other side of the back seat. It had been a long day. Rod mused over the efficiency of Detective Lonebird, but then wondered why he was so cooperative in helping them find this code talker. What are his motives? wondered Rod, as he fell asleep himself. There would be a great deal to report to Larman.

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Chapter Fourteen

The Meetings

Rod called Larman on the drive home with a report, and stopped to pick up his car, before returning to his apartment for the night. He wasn't sure everything in the apartment was how he left it, but he was too tired to give it much thought. Larman requested Rod and Mixie meet him for lunch, and they all could discuss the next steps. Their stay in Calhoun was now getting on three months, and everyone seemed anxious to get back to New York. This is costing our client a fortune, thought Rod. He knew they weren't very close to solving the basic issue of whether a formula exists and what it does.

When Rod arrived at the familiar outside deck at Larman's house, he was surprised to see that Mixie was already there, and she had a new dress, which was quite charming on her. Rod, however, was even more surprised by the fact that Senator Eddelburg and Banion Catorre were there, and the four were drinking Bloody Marys, having a great time.

"Am I late?" asked Rod, knowing he was actually a few minutes early.

"No, just in time for the party," said Larman.

"What are we partying for?" asked Rod, knowing that Larman never had expressed a close relationship with the senator, nor Banion, for that matter.

"We're celebrating our new partnership," said Banion, while holding his glass in the air in front of him.

"Yes," said Larman. "We spent several hours last night and signed a formal agreement between our clients which will pool our resources on this formula thing. Alliance will get the formula, and our client will get the knowledge for his research, and both of the clients will share the vast potential for profit. Seems to work."

Rod looked around at the group surrounding Larman's table. Everyone seemed to be smiling, though Rod wondered why the partnership made sense for Professor Hippa, or the group he represented. But then again, what was the meaning of the partnership? Though he and Mixie had a few good leads, they were far from finding any complete formula, and the translation of the code was still very tenuous. And there were still people out there who were following him and perhaps, trying to kill him.

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Rod pulled up a seat, and Larman handed him a Bloody Mary.

Larman sat back down, and said, “We were telling Banion and the senator about your escapades last night, and they’ve been very complimentary about your efforts in this investigation.”

Rod sat quietly, looking at Larman. He was surprised that his boss spoke so freely of the efforts in finding the contacts for the sole surviving code talker. Rod was hesitant to continue the conversation, not being sure how much of the details had been shared by Mixie.

“Yes, Rod was helpful to me in getting the name and contact point of the code talker,” said Mixie.

Rod glanced up at Mixie. He felt a hot flash cross his face. Helpful to me, is that what she said? Rod said nothing, and took a swig of his drink.

The group sat around the table, had some early lunch, and discussed the details of the two investigations. Rod remained surprised that Larman was sharing all of the information, especially since Rod saw no great contributions from Banion and his Alliance Pharmaceutical group. The senator was pontificating on possible governmental funding for the research following the disclosure of the formula, but Rod wondered whether any of this wishful thinking made any difference at this point. Though he could imagine the senator was getting anxious about his own health prognosis, he wondered how realistic any of this chatter was. Maybe the senator knew more than his was disclosing, and perhaps the boys from Alliance were not telling all they knew, thought Rod. Well, in any event, the findings from their side were now disclosed to the competitor, regardless of the significance of any agreement between them. He had uneasiness about Banion and the senator, and doubted whether they were now partners, but perhaps continued as competitors.

As Rod and Mixie left Larman’s place, they felt little pain, and perhaps had been a little too aggressive with the Bloody Marys. Rod did have two cups of coffee before he left, so he perceived he could drive safely. He pressed a button as he settled behind the wheel, and the convertible top went down. Mixie put on a scarf over her head, as the two started for downtown. Larman had given them each an assignment for the day, and they both felt like the movement of the investigation was in a stall pattern.

As they drove, Rod turned to Mixie, and said, “I’m glad I was helpful to you on our trip yesterday,” he said, with sarcasm in his voice.

“I don’t think I could have done it without you, Roddy,” she said with a smile, but looking straight ahead.

Rod wasn’t sure why this repartee was so irritating to him, since he knew that Mixie was trying to needle him, and had been upset that he was the designated

leader by Larman's directive for the recent mission. Rod continually witnessed her playing up to Larman, and attempting to act as the go between from boss to associate team. Mixie wasn't going to take a backseat to anyone, and Rod knew that Larman might be getting a different version of things from her than he perceived from his vantage point.

"Were you able to fill in Larman on all the activities of yesterday?" he asked.

"I reported to everyone," she answered.

Rod said nothing further on the subject. They drove in silence for the next several blocks.

"My steady, Jake, is coming for the weekend, you know," said Mixie, breaking the silence.

"Your steady?" responded Rod, "I thought you played the field. I didn't know you had a particular boyfriend."

"We dated in Texas. I'm just wild about him!" she said, staring at Rod.

Mixie is a surprise a minute, thought Rod. What will be the flavor next week, he wondered, as he turned into Mixie's condominium parking lot? "I'll have to meet him, Mixie. I assume he's on the older side."

"Actually, a half year younger," she said without looking at Rod. "He may ask me to marry him soon."

"Marry?" said Rod, appearing to view the statement somewhat incredulously. Then he caught himself. Was she toying with him, again?

"If you're a little nicer to me, I'll invite you to the wedding," she said.

"Larman will be working me too much by then to allow for any frivolities like going to a wedding," said Rod.

Mixie opened the door, and slid out as they had stopped in front of her condo.

"Hopefully, we won't find another feather on your windshield," Rod said, and then regretted the flip statement. Mixie didn't think it was funny, and Rod knew she still had substantial fears of being in danger. He was embarrassed by his comment as he watched Mixie walk to her condo and enter the front door. Man, she looked good in that new dress, he thought.

Rod headed back to his apartment. He felt his partying was over for the day, and he thought a quick nap was in order before starting on his new assignments. He pulled into his lot, and parked his car and put up the top. He glanced over at the black car parked near him. It looked familiar. As he opened the door and stood up next to his car, a man in the adjacent car did the same. It was Detective Lonebird, who apparently had been waiting for him.

"Detective?" said Rod, showing some surprise. "Are you here to see me?"

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“Just for a moment, if you can give me some time now,” responded the detective.

The two men went into Rod’s apartment. Rod offered Detective Lonebird some coffee, but he himself had plenty before leaving Larman’s place. The detective passed on the offer, and Rod sat down in the corner chair, while the detective sat on the couch.

Detective Lonebird came right to the apparent point of his visit. “My sources tell me that you and your associates have been seen with representatives of the Alliance Pharmaceutical Company, and there are suspicions you have some connection.”

“Suspicious?” said Rod. He was trying to figure where the conversation was going.

“Why are our associations relevant to anything?” asked Rod.

“You had not mentioned it to me. I mean you never said you were working with Alliance Pharmaceuticals before we went to see my grandfather,” said Detective Lonebird. “People in the community know I have helped you. The connection with Alliance Pharmaceuticals is not helpful to me.”

Rod was confused. “Not helpful?” he responded, with a look of confusion on his face.

“Some in the Cherokee community here have long memories. They know the name of Alliance Pharmaceuticals, and know it is the successor corporation to Arnold Medical.”

“Arnold Medical?” asked Rod. This was all new information to him.

“Yes,” said Detective Lonebird. “Arnold Medical was a local drug company here in the twenties, and it had a lab just north of Calhoun. There was a group of biologists and chemists who worked in a facility back down Manhattan Road. It was sort of a secretive place. No one in the community, the Cherokee Nation, knew or cared much about it.”

“Why is that important?” asked Rod.

It deals with this group, the Brotherhood,” said Detective Lonebird. “It’s important because it might affect your safety here in Calhoun.”

Rod stared at the detective. How can this bit of historical information affect my safety, he wondered? He needed more information. “Tell me about this Arnold Medical,” he said.

The detective leaned toward Rod, and continued, “At the end of the First World War, Arnold Medical was small, but well connected in Washington. It was given some special, yet very secret assignments, for the war effort. The experiments were continued after the war, and for a number of years.”

“What were the experiments?” asked Rod.

“They were testing various antidotes for gas inhalation which could be used during the war, and for any future hostilities. It was a major project, but very secret, and they avoided all publicity. There were armed guards around the facility. It even expanded to other experiments dealing with antidotes for biological weapons.”

“I’m having difficulty connecting this history with our present danger here,” said Rod, after a few seconds of pondering the story.

“Unfortunately,” continued Detective Lonebird, “the testing required living organisms, and over a relatively short time, proceeded to the higher forms of life. The exigencies of war accelerated a process beyond prudence, I guess.”

“Beyond prudence?” asked Rod. “Did the company do things which were improper?”

“Very much so,” answered the detective. “They started to experiment with the various perceived antidotes long before they were fully developed, and more importantly, they started to use humans as guinea pigs.”

“Was that legal?” asked Rod, now getting interested in the story.

“Not by any standards, but this company flew under the radar, probably with the help of the federal government which was desperate to find these antidotes. I think the company was giving the feds just enough information on the results to keep up an avid interest in the War Department.”

“But the local people must have known about it?” said Rod.

“The victims were the rural poor around here. They were induced by cash payouts without any disclosures of the dangers. The recruitment process had to be very discrete, since the pool of knowledge about the activities had to be very limited. No one who could get attention to the testing could have any reasonable ability to make disclosures to the media, or to the public in any form.”

“How did they select these people?” asked Rod.

“They targeted a small poor group of the Cherokee Nation. Unfortunately, Arnold Medical paid significant amounts to a few Cherokee Nation representatives who provided access to some of the hurting Cherokee descendants in the remote parts of the adjacent counties. Working through these agents, they were clever, and found several hundred people to use in the testing process. Even used some children, I understand.”

“What happened to these people?” asked Rod.

“As far as the public record is concerned, it is unclear,” answered Detective Lonebird. In the Cherokee community, we have hired lawyers and private detectives to find out who these people are, and what became of them. There are certainly rumors around our community, but it is a very secretive subject. My father told me that many of these people suffered severe ramifications from

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the testing, their lives were shortened, and the quality of life of the survivors was jeopardized. The company played on the ignorance of their subjects, and they only approached the most vulnerable people.”

Rod continued his questioning. “But, Detective Lonebird, I can’t believe in this day and age, some of these allegations couldn’t have escaped to the publicity of the media, and become a real scandal around here. Surely, some of these people or their relatives would be talking.”

“It has been a remarkable tragedy, that is for sure,” continued the detective. If you ask any of the present public officials, or even members of our police force, you will hear only denials of the existence of these activities. I have never seen a news article about the experiments at Arnold Medical. It’s a story told only among a few old residents of the Cherokee community, but even these people have given up the ghost for any disclosure.”

Rod asked, “I can’t believe a few of these people wouldn’t have come to the authorities, or hired a lawyer.”

“Rod, it’s a mystery. I’ve heard that many were paid handsome amounts to remain quiet, and some were transported to the western United States to live with relatives. There were clearly incentives for these people to remain silent. Actually, the costs to the company probably were not that high, but the payoffs were substantial relative to the people’s possessions. And I assume that local officials were paid off, and perhaps threatened to keep them quiet.”

“What about people who couldn’t be paid off, or perhaps their relatives?”

Detective Lonebird checked his watch. Perhaps the conversation was getting longer on this subject than he had anticipated. He turned back to Rod. “There may have been a few, but the company did invest substantial amounts to eliminate these problems. How it was done, I’m not sure. There are rumors in our community that some may have been murdered by professionals who made the deaths look like accidents. I have researched some early deaths in our Cherokee community, and I see the possibilities. Unfortunately, proof, at this point, is probably nonexistent. “

“Wouldn’t there be a follow-up to the records of testing by the government?” asked Rod.

“There is evidence in the Congressional Record of questions being asked after the Second World War, but they never came to anything. I have never seen, nor would I expect evidence or details of these experiments. Several of us in the Cherokee Community have tried to use the Freedom of Information process at the federal and state levels without any success. Back in the early seventies we actually hired a local law firm to research the history, but it came up with nothing we could use. I think effective efforts are long over, since those of us looking

for these old answers are now a small number of ordinary citizens without significant resources.”

“These allegations are substantial, and surprising to me,” said Rod. “Do these claims have anything to do with this Brotherhood we have encountered?”

Detective Lonebird answered, “There are some in the Brotherhood who have heard the story, I am sure. Whether it is a motivating issue for the group’s activities, I rather doubt.”

Now Rod’s thoughts came back to the beginning of his conversation with the detective.

“So you are telling me that someone may have a vendetta against Alliance Pharmaceutical which could place us in danger by association?” he asked.

“Possibly,” answered Detective Lonebird. “In any event, I thought you should know this story. I have told you rather than Mr. Kingfund, since I suspect from my reports that he is more associated with the company than you might be.”

Rod was now very confused, but had one more question on his mind. “Well, can you tell me if this story and your warnings have anything to do with our investigation of this gohida ama?”

“There may be a connection, but I don’t know,” answered the detective. “I will say that your connection with Alliance Pharmaceutical could be a problem in the Cherokee community around here.”

The detective checked his watch again. “Now I must be going, Rod. I need to be downtown in fifteen minutes for a meeting.”

Detective Lonebird rose from his seat, and shook Rod’s hand. “I’m responsible for everyone’s safety around here, you know.” The detective left, and Rod sat in his chair where he soon fell asleep. Suddenly, he was awakened by a knock on the door.

Opening the door he was somewhat surprised to see Gerri with three couples standing on the front step. “Come on, Rod, we’re going down to a movie at the Star Theatre. Come with us, it will be great. It’ll take your mind off your work.”

Rod grabbed his coat, and headed out. He didn’t really want to do any of Larman’s assigned projects today, anyways. “I’ll need to drive,” he said, as he picked up his keys from the table near the door.

“I’ll come with you,” called Gerri. As Rod got into the front seat of his car, he glanced across the parking lot, and observed a dark SUV parked at the far side. The windows were dark, and it was some distance away, so he continued to watch it in his rearview mirror as he pulled away. It did not follow him, but that made him nervous, too.

Chapter Fifteen

The Message

Rod determined he was being followed that afternoon, and he worried about Mixie, who was off in some other direction. She was feisty, but Rod knew she sometimes did foolish things in connection with her personal safety. Larman could take care of himself, Rod thought, since the old guy was a Marine during the Vietnam War, and his appearance as a hippy artist from Greenwich Village was deceptive, he knew. Rod also had concern for Gerri and her friends, since association with him might have some related risk. It was tough, he thought, to be followed and continually watched, without knowing who it was or which side of the equation they represented. Gerri enjoyed herself this afternoon, however, and her playful ways took Rod's mind off his dilemma. The five couples, all in their middle to late twenties, took off for dinner after the movie to the local Italian establishment, Vintages.

As Rod was finishing the pizza he had ordered, he heard his cell phone ring. It was Larman on the other end. "Rod, get over here right away. Do you know where I can reach Mixie, her phone gives me that tacky message of hers."

"She said something about a boyfriend coming down this way for the weekend. Maybe she's out with him," answered Rod.

"That's great," responded Larman, showing some mild disgust. Rod knew this wasn't the usual tone of his boss' voice. This must be important, thought Rod.

"I'll excuse myself, and be right there," said Rod, putting the phone back in his pocket.

Gerri, who was enjoying another glass of wine, reached over and touched his arm. "You're not leaving, are you? The night's young and I know we can really party this time."

Rod looked into her eyes and seemed to get the message, or at least the message he was anticipating. Larman better have something critical to discuss, he thought, for the price is high.

"Yep, I'm afraid work calls," responded Rod.

"That stinks," said Gerri, with a smirk. "Can you catch up with us later?" she asked.

“Possibly,” he said, “I’ll do my best,” He gave a big flowing wave to the table and a quick kiss to Gerri. Rod handed the waitress a twenty-dollar bill, which he figured was his share of the tab, and walked briskly out of the restaurant. Off he went, traveling to Larman’s house. Tonight it was chilly, so the meeting wouldn’t be on the deck, but in the small study. When he arrived, he was surprised to see Mixie sitting on the couch. There were the new partners, thought Rod, both standing near a desk. Behind the desk sat Larman, talking on the telephone. As Rod moved into the room, Larman looked up, and placed his phone on the desk.

“Our client,” he said to Rod, “wanted to make sure he was fully brought up to date.”

Rod shook his head, but he wasn’t sure why he did, since he knew nothing about the reason for this meeting.

Banion sat down on the arm of the couch, and continued what appeared as an earlier conversation with Larman. “I have Duncan and Colbertson coming down in the morning, and we are moving our contact people to an alert status,” he said.

Senator Eddelburg was now pacing at the other end of the room. “I have several members of my staff in Washington available, if needed,” he said.

Larman smiled, realizing that Rod was unaware of the current activity, and the reason for it.

Rod looked at Mixie. She smiled at him, since she was one of the “boys” for this meeting.

Larman reached into the top drawer of the desk and pulled out a piece of light grey stationery, handing it to Rod. The room was now quiet.

Rod read the letter, noting the strange feather insignia at the top. There were no other references or contact information on the letter. It was merely two paragraphs long. It read as follows:

“To: Larman Kingfund

From: tsaligi one

I hold two steps of gohida ama for which you search. I believe you hold the other three steps for this formula. I have had these steps translated by a surviving code talker. I have sworn to keep these materials secret, but circumstances and your actions change things for me. I will sell you these translated steps for fifty million dollars, US. If you are interested, affirm by raising the flag on your porch at nine, Wednesday morning. I have other bidders”.

“The English and the writing are decent,” said Rod, as he handed the paper back to Larman.

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“Does that surprise you?” Larman asked.

“The simplicity of the note surprises me, especially since the sender is asking for fifty million dollars,” responded Rod.

“We think it’s a fraud,” piped Mixie, smiling at the room.

“The request, of course, is preposterous,” said the senator.

Larman chuckled, as he stared at the letter. “Yes, probably a fraud, but it certainly would roll up gold at the end of the rainbow, assuming we got cooperation from the code talker.”

“We would consider paying a much smaller amount,” said Banion, clearly having some interest in the note. “There would need to be a full venting of the offer, however. My people would need some strong proof that this formula actually existed, and most importantly, showed dramatic results.”

“That would be quite a challenge,” remarked Rod, still trying to gather his thoughts.

“What kind of proof would you need?” asked Mixie.

“First, we would need to know we could translate the first three steps you people have. Then we would need to have a knowledgeable scientist in the area of aging and cell reproduction look at the first three steps to see if they made any sense. Finally, I think we need to see that this formula actually has led to any potion that demonstrated a positive impact on aging. It’s been a very nebulous thing to date, and we have spent the time and money only because of a small possibility that this formula exists, and more importantly, works to some extent.”

Larman stood up. “First thing is we need to establish a dialog with this mystery seller. I say we put up the flag on Wednesday and see what happens. We have little else, gentlemen.”

“And lady,” added Mixie.

“Of course,” said Larman, smiling at her.

“I’ll talk to a few people,” said Banion, “but that demand is multitudes above anything we would be willing to pay.”

Senator Eddelburg added, “Banion, its value would make fifty million dollars seem like pocket change. If you guys won’t go with it, maybe I can get Congress to allocate some money.”

Larman laughed, but Banion seemed to take the senator’s comment seriously.

“Senator, I didn’t say we weren’t interested, and Congress would be the last place to take this deal.”

Senator Eddelburg smiled. “Well then, my friend, let’s get the wheels moving to find out where we go from here. My time is getting shorter by the month.”

The meeting broke up with mutual promises of confidentiality, though Rod sensed that none of the participants truly trusted the others. This would be a busy several days, he thought, and the result was probably a clever hoax. One created by someone with interesting knowledge about this project, thought Rod.

Larman agreed to talk to his client in more detail over the next couple of days, but assured everyone that it was highly doubtful that the client would contribute to the available payment fund. Larman did plant the seed that his client could produce some expertise on the questions regarding the legitimacy of the first three steps to the formula, and he agreed he would send the material to the client as soon as the code was broken.

Rod left the meeting with his head spinning. As he walked out with Mixie, he felt a need to change the subject completely.

“Did you leave your boyfriend in the lurch to make Larman’s meeting,” he asked.

“My boyfriend?” she asked, squinting her eyes at him.

“The Texan...I thought he might be your fiancé,” he responded.

“Oh, no. He had to cancel. His father wanted him to fly to India for business,” she said, giving a slight smile, and walking ahead of Rod to her car.

That appeared to be the end of that particular conversation.

“Want to get a nightcap?” he asked.

“Well, I was going to do a wash, but I have a few minutes, I guess. Where to?” she called out, as she opened the door to her car.

“How ‘bout *Clinton’s*, just down around the corner?” suggested Rod, standing by his car.

“See you there,” said Mixie, as she closed her door and headed down the street.

Clinton’s was a small bar, with an outdoor patio along a brick side street. There was always a good crowd at night, and the noise was a deterrent to casual conversation. Luckily, Mixie and Rod found a table at the far end of the outside patio area, and it was quiet enough to hear each other, even when speaking at lower volume.

“What do you think of this note which Larman got?” she asked after the waitress took their order.

“It seems sort of amateurish,” responded Rod. “But perhaps the sender isn’t a sophisticated criminal, but a somewhat average Joe.”

“Won’t Banion and his hoard of professional investigators be able to debunk the note and find out about the sender?” she asked, appearing to know the answer to her own question.

Fountain of Revenge

“In my opinion,” said Rod, “This whole assignment down here in Calhoun is someone’s idea of a joke. I doubt whether this Cherokee formula exists, or maybe it existed, and is long ago lost. I even have fond memories of the office back in New York.”

“Me, too,” said Mixie. “This was a nice exciting change for a while, but it’s four months now, and I’ve had it. I can’t even buy decent clothes down here, and I’m tired of waiting for things from the Internet.”

“I’m really not that tired of the place, you know Mixie. I kind of like it here, in a way. Might not go back to New York, at all.” Rod smiled at Mixie, who looked at him with widening eyes.

“What! You’re pulling my leg, Rod. Right, you’re doing this for effect, aren’t you?”

“Brad Soppenburg told me a while back that I could have a job with his firm. Small, but there is variety. And you don’t spend all of your living days in the library,” responded Rod.

Rod realized that Mixie was trying to figure him out and determine the level of serious discussion they were having. He laughed, and said, “Mixie, don’t take me too seriously. Maybe I’m just going crazy from this assignment.”

“I think you’re serious,” she said, stretching out the words, as she stared at him. “I think you would just as soon marry Gerri, and play golf twice a week.”

“Golf?”

Mixie appeared to note that his attention focused on the golf, not on her reference to Gerri Delmore. He knew she would have preferred his reaction to be to the reference to marrying Gerri, but he figured ignoring her would be more satisfying at that moment. Rod couldn’t analyze the true Mixie, but he’d always played defense in their social relationship, and he now sensed that he might go on offense; at least, maybe a little.

The waitress brought two beers, and Rod slapped ten dollars on the table. That would be the extent of his drinking tonight, he thought. He could see that Mixie was deep in thought, and didn’t even reach for her beer right away.

“I would hate living here,” she said, “I need the excitement of the big time.”

“We’d talk from time to time on the phone, wouldn’t we?” Rod said, with a smile.

“I doubt it. Doubt it, seriously,” she said, as she reached for her beer, and took a big swig. That part of the conversation seemed to be over.

Mixie changed the subject back to the meeting at Larman’s house. “Before you came,” she said, “Larman said he wants us to deal with the first part of the puzzle. He needs to get the code reader to translate the first three steps of the formula. How would we do that, Rod?”

Richard Dodge Davidson

“We’d need to get Detective Lonebird involved right away, I guess.”
answered Rod.

“I’ll give him a call in the morning,” said Mixie.

The woman from New York is taking over again, he thought.

“Keep me in the loop,” he answered, with a smile.

###

Chapter Sixteen

The Late Johnny Firetree

Rod continued to communicate with the New York firm by email, and was reviewing his recent communication the next morning when his cell phone rang. It was Mixie, and she seemed excited.

“I’m here with Larman, and we have a plan to get the code talker to look at our first three steps of the formula.”

“Detective Lonebird said he will get back to me later this morning,” continued Mixie, from the other end of the phone.

“Does the detective think this code talker will actually be able to give us anything?” asked Rod.

“Larman says he’s authorized to offer some incentive, and when I told that to Detective Lonebird, he said that might help.”

Rod asked, “You mean the cash type of incentive?”

“Yes, and Larman is arranging to get the cash this morning. We’ll start with ten thousand dollars. Detective Lonebird is getting word to his grandfather to try to arrange a meeting with this guy,” continued Mixie.

“O.K. keep me informed,” said Rod.

“No, Larman said you should assist me. I think we can do this meeting this afternoon or tonight,” she said.

“Assist you?” said Rod.

“I’ll be back to you in several hours,” she said.

At around two thirty, Rod received a call from Detective Lonebird. Rod was washing his car, and pulled his cell phone from his jacket.

“Rod, there’s a chance we can get to meet with this code talker later this afternoon or early tonight. Mixie is making some arrangements, and asked me to call you. Can you meet at my office at five this afternoon?”

“Yes, of course,” responded Rod.

“No, better yet,” interjected the detective, “drive and park on the third floor of the Municipal Garage at Flower Street at six. Look for the dark windowed SUV parked up there. Come over to the SUV as soon as you get there, since I assume there’s a good chance someone will be following you.”

“Got it,” said Rod, putting his phone back into his pocket.

I guess this routine is necessary, he thought. That code talker could be a critical part of this operation.

Rod met the SUV as planned, trying to elude any suspicious cars tailing him to the Municipal Garage. He jumped into the side door of the vehicle, and saw that Mixie was in the front seat already with Detective Lonebird. “Got everything?” he asked her.

“We got some good breaks,” she said, pointing to Detective Lonebird. “The money did the trick, though I needed to come up with twenty thousand, on short notice. Detective Lonebird did wonders convincing his grandfather to contact this Johnny Firetree, and the man needs the money badly. It all worked quickly, but we need to be careful. Johnny is very scared of us, and will disappear again if we don’t do this right.”

Rod noted that much had been done without his involvement. He felt somewhat offended that Mixie was now running the show with Larman and the detective.

“I’ll help where I can,” he said with a certain tone of irritation.

The SUV pulled out of the back exit of the garage, making several diversionary turns before proceeding north toward the grandfather’s forest home. Detective Lonebird surveyed his rearview mirror continuously, and said little during the trip.

Then he spoke, and broke the silence. “Detective O’Hara and Officer Lane are behind us as a sweep.”

“A sweep?” asked Rod.

“Yes, if they detect anyone following us, they will make a routine traffic stop, to detain the driver,” the detective said with a slight smile.

Rod looked out the window to see if any cars looked suspicious. He asked, “Mixie, I assume you and Larman have a plan for Johnny Firetree?”

She answered, “Well, we have several plans, depending on where we get with him. If he can recognize this code on this copy of the first three steps of the formula, we’ll see what he can give us. When we know he can do it, I’m authorized to make him an offer he shouldn’t refuse.”

“What offer?” asked Rod.

“All expense paid vacation at a location of his choice. At that point, we need to isolate and protect him, since his skill will be critical to interpret the final two steps of gohida ama,” she said.

“And what if he can’t do it? Like, for example, he doesn’t have the code book anymore,” asked Rod.

Fountain of Revenge

“That’s not what Larman would want to hear,” she said in a serious tone. “That’s where you come in. You would then report our disappointment to Larman.”

Rod continued to stare out the window, and said nothing. He was trying to decide how seriously to take Mixie. She could definitely get under his skin. Rod would take a new tact during her “bossy” periods, and just remain silent, regardless of the amount of effort it took.

“I must warn both of you,” said Detective Lonebird, “Do not let down your guard around my grandfather, but especially around Johnny. My grandfather can be an old irrational man, and Johnny is totally unpredictable, and may not be cooperative at all. Or he may be unable to help us. It’s been a long time since he was proficient at that Cherokee code.”

“Why is your grandfather willing to help us now?” asked Rod.

“I think he’s so tired of all this activity, and he is still bitter over the murder of Mrs. Satterly. He just wants to get this whole thing over, and the cash helps quite a bit,” said Detective Lonebird.

The detective drove around for about a half an hour, apparently in further evasive detours. Finally, he turned onto a back road in the area where Mixie and Rod had been before, but this time it looked different than their last visit to the grandfather.

“We’re coming into the woods from another direction this time,” said Detective Lonebird, and we’re going to be a little north of my grandfather’s place. Hopefully, we’ll find him here with Johnny, as I arranged earlier this afternoon. Had to have a deputy drive here just to give him the message. He said he could do it.”

“Last time we were in the vicinity,” said Rod, “it wasn’t the most pleasant experience. Hopefully, this will be a more hospitable visit.”

Rod hoped that Detective Lonebird was friendly to their efforts, as he now seemed to be very cooperative. Without him, they would accomplish nothing relative to the code reading. On the other hand, he thought, perhaps he is setting us up, or is leading us on wild goose chases. At this point, however, Rod knew that Mixie and he had no other choice, and could only execute the plan as the detective had laid it out.

Detective Lonebird pulled the SUV along the shoulder of a straight section of the gravel road, bringing the vehicle to a quiet stop. “Here’s where it gets interesting,” said the detective, in a soft voice. He pulled out three flashlights from the back of the SUV, handing one to both Mixie and Rod. This time Mixie had tennis sneakers, not the high heels she has worn on these expeditions before. Detective Lonebird gave a silent signal with his arm, and the three of

them moved along a narrow path into the woods. Rod needed to hold onto several trees, since the path had a number of slick spots from a recent rain in the area. They walked for about ten minutes, and Rod kept close to Detective Lonebird, knowing he couldn't find his way back to the vehicle in the dark walking alone, or just with Mixie. He hoped the detective could find his way to the SUV.

Then Detective Lonebird stopped. He pointed in the direction of a small clearing in the heavy forest at a yellow flickering light in the distance. "That is our destination, I think," said the detective, "and hopefully, my grandfather will be outside of the shack up there to meet us."

Now, Mixie, who had been walking along with Detective Lonebird, slid behind Rod as the three of them walked toward the light. They soon saw a small dilapidated building in the clearing, and there was the light coming from the window on the right side of the structure. It was quiet except for the myriad of insect sounds in the humid air. "This is where we have to be careful," whispered Detective Lonebird, proceeding cautiously touching each tree along the path.

"Where is your grandfather?" asked Rod, as the three came to within about two hundred fifty feet of the shack.

The detective held up his hand, signaling the need for silence. He cupped his hand around his mouth, and made a bird sound, different than anything Rod could recognize. After a few seconds, he did it again, hearing no response the first time. Detective Lonebird moved a few steps closing to the shack, and then knelt down on one knee. He signaled to Rod and Mixie to get down behind him. He then gave the birdcall another time.

Suddenly, a sharp noise made all three of them hit the deck. It clearly was a shot from a rifle or shotgun. This isn't going to be a friendly meeting after all, Rod surmised.

Another shot rang out, and Rod saw some bark shatter from a tree to his right.

"Turn off the lights," shouted the detective, as he rolled behind some underbrush. Rod and Mixie clicked off their flashlights, but now it seemed pitch black, except for the dim light coming from the window of the shack.

Rod felt Mixie's hand on his ankle, as the two of them lay in the underbrush. He moved to his left into thicker bushes, and Mixie followed. Then Rod heard something in the darkness that sounded like a small animal moving through the tree branches. Rod froze in the underbrush, and Mixie moved up against his back. Rod could hear Detective Lonebird, jogging across the opening in front of the shed, and the noise dissipated in some bushes on the left side of the structure.

Fountain of Revenge

“Where is he going?” whispered Mixie, with a tone of horror.

Rod froze in total fear and confusion. Where was he going? he wondered. This is no time for him to disappear. Did he see something we missed?

As Rod struggled to figure his next move, another shot rang out, apparently coming from the open window of the shack. The air smelled like shotgun powder. Maybe it was time to run into the dark forest away from the shed, thought Rod. He should have gotten that handgun he was contemplating earlier.

Rod saw a figure run across the opening near the entrance to the shed. It appeared to be Detective Lonebird, but he couldn't be sure, since the light was minimal, coming only from the window in the shack. Another shot rang out, and the figure seemed to fall away, as Rod strained to see what was happening.

“What was that?” whispered Mixie, holding Rod's arm and hiding behind him.

“I hope it's not what I think could have happened,” he whispered back to her.

“What do you think happened?” she said.

“Detective Lonebird may have been shot,” he said, and he could feel her hand tightening on his arm.

Then there was silence for a few seconds. Rod looked behind him, but it appeared to be total darkness. How do we exit this situation and find our way out of here? he wondered.

Rod jumped back, he heard another rustling in the high bushes to his left. Could that be Detective Lonebird, he wished. He grabbed Mixie's hand, and the two of them moved along the ground, and slid behind what appeared to be two large tree trunks. Then another shot rang out in the night air. Mixie ducked down near the ground.

“What do we do now?” she whispered to Rod. Leadership of this expedition had now switched, he thought.

Then Mixie gave out a quick shriek. Rod felt a hand on his shoulder. He recoiled, raising his arms in the air.

“Ho'd on, lad,” came a voice out of the darkness. “I'm not hurt'in any un. I'm tr'un to calm the o'l gizzer, and find ma grandson,” said an elderly man who came close enough to them to be seen. His face was still in the dark, but the light from the window coupled with a slight amount of moonlight was enough to recognize the grey-haired man with deep chiseled lines in his face. He brought this face close to Rod, as Mixie stared up at the two men.

“I'm wur'd the old coot shot my grandson,” said the man, who Rod now knew was the detective's grandfather. The old man stared at both Mixie and Rod, with a look of great concern. Rod saw he carried a shotgun, which gave

him some relief. Again, the silence was shattered with another blast from a shotgun. Rod could hear the leaves behind him make a fluttering noise.

“Is this Johnny Firetree shooting at us?” asked Mixie.

“Yas sir, he’s a crazy old coot. I was a’prayin it was one of those gud days, but I’d be wrong there,” said the man, speaking with a whisper.

Rod could see that the grandfather had some blood smeared on his forehead, as he turned his face toward the direction of the lighted window. “Have you been hit by a shot?” asked Rod.

“No sur,” the grandfather answered. “Cut ma hand try’in get out of the cabin when Johnny go’in crazy. He’s having delusions, I guess. In tha monin, he’s very gud and very calm. Even sho’d me some of dose old codebooks. He’s proud of his bein one of dose Marenes. Then he got crazy, and accused me of turning him in. Didn’t know what he was talking about.”

“Will he try to kill us?” asked Mixie, still holding on to Rod’s arm.

“Probably might,” said the old man, “but I got to find my grandson. Can’t just leave here.”

A myriad of thoughts went through Rod’s mind. What made the most sense? Spread out and try to overpower Johnny, or move in together and try to find the detective and overpower Johnny together. Rod wished there was more light, but there would be no using the flashlights, that was for sure. The old man in the shack was looking for lights, and had surely reloaded his shotgun. Rod wondered about the grandfather who had mysteriously joined them. Could he be trusted, or was he part of Johnny’s welcome?

“Do you want me to take your shotgun and move toward the house?” asked Rod, not knowing exactly what his plan to subdue Johnny would be, but having the shotgun sounded good.

“Nobody tak’in ma shotgun, son,” said the grandfather, and he stepped back from Rod. Another shot rang out and both men hit the ground again.

“O.K., then, you move through the forest in that direction, and we’ll work our way toward the shed in the high bushes to the left side,” said Rod. Mixie squeezed Rod’s arm, which he took for an expression of hesitation to his plan.

“Well, all right, if needs be,” said the old man. “Ma grandsun needs to be found.”

With that, the old man disappeared into the darkness. Mixie was up against Rod’s back, and he could hear her breathing. “Mixie, listen to me,” he whispered. “I’m going to run along the dark bush line over there, and you need to follow me, and not drop back. Understand?”

“Yes, Roddy,” she whispered. He thought she might be crying now.

Fountain of Revenge

The two of them ran across a small opening and continued on the uneven ground, with their hands out in front of them to feel the underbrush. Another shot rang out from the shack. Rod heard Mixie fall behind him, and she gave out a short shriek. Another shot rang out, and Rod hit the ground, immediately looking behind him for Mixie. “You O.K.?” he whispered, fearing the answer, if there was one.

“I’m...I’m O.K. Just tripped and skinned my knee,” came the response.

Rod stared at the shack for a moment, trying to figure how to overpower the person shooting at them when he had no weapon himself. But then again, how do I know it’s only one person in that shack, he thought. And why don’t I see Detective Lonebird, or at least his body in front of the shack?

Rod turned to Mixie. “Our only chance is to circle around the rear of the shack, and see if we can surprise Johnny from behind. It’s risky. But short of trying to run away through the dark forest, I don’t see what else we can do?”

Mixie stared back at him. “I’m with you,” she whispered, though Rod wasn’t sure how adamant she was. Rod moved to the side of the shack, and Mixie followed. Another shot rang out, and this time Rod heard the rustling of leaves across the opening. It appeared that the shooter now was targeting something else. Perhaps the grandfather had distracted Johnny, and Rod had his opening.

Rod stubbed his foot against an object leaning on a stump at the side of the shack. It was a metal stake of some sort. Rod picked it up and slipped it under his belt. It was small, but it was the only weapon he would have or could find, he thought.

“Do you want to come with me, or stay here?” he asked, turning to Mixie.

“I’m not staying here alone,” she whispered.

They slid up against the back wall of the shack, and moved toward what appeared to be an opening in the back of the structure. Rod moved closer, and saw some light leaking through what appeared to be a door. Mixie followed closely, but hit what appeared to be part of the foundation of the building, and stumbled against the wall of the shack. Rod spun around upon hearing the noise from her fall. Now he knew it was the time to make a move, or it would be too late for them. He turned quickly and grabbed what he thought was a door latch. It did not open immediately, and he gave it another tug. Suddenly, without warning, the door lurched back toward Rod, knocking him off his feet and he careened against a tree. He felt pain in his shoulder and was dizzy, as he looked up and saw an old man who must be Johnny. The man looked crazed, and brought his shotgun to his shoulder to fire. Mixie gave out a scream, falling back.

A shot rang out.

Richard Dodge Davidson

Rod was confused. He seemed to be alive. He heard Mixie sobbing. He looked toward the open door of the shack, which opening provided some light to the scene. There was a body lying just off the back step to the shack. To the side he saw Detective Lonebird limping along the left edge of the structure, with his gun drawn. Rod looked again at the body, and knew it was Johnny Firetree. Behind the detective Rod could make out his grandfather walking with the other shotgun on his shoulder.

“Everybody O.K.?” asked the detective, breathing somewhat heavily, and in some pain from what appeared to be a leg wound.

Mixie continued to sob. She was trying to compose herself. Rod shook his head, moved his arm slightly, which created pain in his right shoulder. “I’m O.K., I think,” he said after a few seconds.

Detective Lonebird went over to the man lying at the foot of the back stoop to the shack. He felt his pulse, and looked up, “I have disappointing news for you two,” the detective said slowly. “Your code talker will read no code for you now.”

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Chapter Seventeen

Moving Toward the Goal

Rod drove to meet Larman the next morning, around eight. He was still groggy from the night before and his shoulder still was sore. So much had happened last night. Mixie was sobbing for most of the ride home, after all of the activities at the shack and the shooting. Just getting back to the location had been a challenge to the authorities, and somehow the media had found them before they could get back to the city. It wasn't every night you're just glad to be alive, thought Rod. There wasn't much time to sleep, and he was feeling it this morning. But even more than the numbness he felt from their close encounter with death, Rod knew that Larman would be greatly disappointed. Larman had heard from Rod's earlier call that the discovered code talker was now dead, so the formula was probably gone for good. It would be a difficult pill for Larman and his client Professor Hippa to take, after all these months, and after the large amount of money spent for this investigation. Further, those guys from Alliance Pharmaceutical and the good senator would be very upset, but Rod certainly appreciated that Detective Lonebird had saved his life. He did what he had to do, mused Rod. Now, maybe he and Mixie could head back to New York and get into some of those research projects again. Those long days and nights in the library had started to look pretty good for some time now.

Rod noticed several cars along the street in front of Larman's house, and knew that the Alliance Pharmaceutical contingency would be there, though he was surprised to see Mixie's car out front, too. After last night, he expected she would sleep the day away.

The group was not on the outside deck today, but inside the living room area of the house. Rod entered, and saw Banion, another gentlemen he didn't recognize, and Senator Eddelburg sitting around the room, obviously in a rather sullen mood. Larman was standing in the corner pouring coffee, and Mixie was sitting on the corner of the couch.

Banion looked up. "Rod, we certainly are glad to see you and Mixie in good health today."

Rod smiled at him, and glanced over at Mixie. "It's nice to be here, Banion, but we certainly were disappointed by the outcome of our visit with the code talker."

"It certainly is discouraging to our endeavor here," responded Banion.

"But not terminating," interjected Senator Eddelburg.

"How so?" asked Rod, looking at the senator.

"I'm having my staff do more research into the Oklahoma code talkers. I'm hopeful they can find someone or something we can use to break this code," said the senator, somewhat anxiously.

Larman walked into the center of the room, and handed Mixie and Rod a cup of coffee. "This development is a problem, of course," said Larman, "but I'm not sure we're ready to give up completely, at this point."

"Completely?" said Rod, trying to decipher what had been discussed before he got there.

"It's possible we can have the three steps of code we did recover studied in depth by code and language experts," Larman continued, "but there are no guarantees of success, of course."

"And there is this other undisclosed person sending us notes about the other steps of the formula, who might help us," added Banion.

"Will we be going back to New York?" asked Mixie.

"Probably so," responded Larman, "I'm not sure there is much more we can do here, unless there is some chance that this undisclosed note writer can actually show us something of value."

"And are you going to put up the flag on Wednesday, like the note requested?" asked Rod.

"Yes, of course," said Larman, "but now the dynamics have changed from the time we got the note. Now our unknown note writer will need to show of something making this whole business a possibility again. I doubt we will see anything."

The group sat and discussed the status of their endeavors. Rod learned that the man in the room he did not recognize was Anton Guillard, a senior vice-president of Alliance Pharmaceuticals, who had just arrived from Paris the night before. He seemed somewhat negative over the entire project now, but Rod felt his attitude might be a guise to his true negotiating posture.

The doorbell rang, and Larman left the room for a moment. When he returned he was holding a telegram. Rod only knew it was a telegram because Larman announced that he had just had this telegram delivered to him. He read it aloud to the group:

“To: Larman Kingfund:

I was saddened to see the morning news about the sudden passing of Mr. Johnny Firetree. I actually knew the gentlemen at one time, before his illness. I should inform you, however, that his untimely death is not an impediment to our successful transaction. His involvement was unnecessary from the outset. I have a complete formula in my possession, translated in modern scientific format. In addition, I have some gohida ama in my possession. Hopefully, you will consider this state of affairs when you respond to me on Wednesday.

Signed, ‘an old man’”

The group stared at each other; they were speechless. “This is an obvious fraud,” said Anton Guillard, standing and pacing across the room.

“This is too neat, isn’t it,” said Larman, not expecting an answer. “After all of this, it won’t be this easy. I think we have an unsophisticated con-man as our last hope,” he said as he dropped the telegram on the table in front of him. “And who sends a telegram anymore?”

Rod sat quietly, but did not know what would sound intelligent at this point. In one sense, he agreed that having someone claim to have the entire package now seemed highly unrealistic, but not impossible. But, why now, after all of this time? Mixie sat looking around at everyone, but didn’t say anything.

Senator Eddelburg placed his coffee cup in his saucer, “Gentlemen, and Mixie, my dear, what choice do we have? Obviously, we must move ahead and find out what this person has before we can claim it as a hoax.”

Banion said, “Well, it seems highly unlikely that this person has the complete formula, already translated, and even more ridiculous that he has a sample of the potion. If any of this is true, we’ve been on a wild goose chase, and spent millions of dollars for nothing.”

“Ridiculous.... Yes, ridiculous,” said Anton Guillard, “and as vice-president of Alliance, I need to make a stop to this foolishness.”

“You mean you would pull the plug at this point?” asked Larman.

“I need to explain this expense to our board of directors. It’s been an activity we have been doing for the last eight months, and we show little for it,” continued Guillard. “But, depending on Banion’s recommendation, I would be willing to stick my neck out a small amount to get some proof, any proof, that any of this actually exists.”

Banion looked around the room, and there was a general silence. “At this point, we should give it one last shot. Let’s see what this guy has. Anyways we’ll get proof before we pay any money, I assure you.”

“Should we call the police?” asked Mixie.

“Why?” asked Larman. “There is no direct crime. This is someone selling something of value to a willing buyer, I guess. If it’s a fraud, that’s something else again.”

“How can we be assured that it’s not a fraud, the most likely scenario?” said Guillard, now pacing the room.

“We’ll need certain prerequisites, before any of your money passes,” responded Larman.

“What type of proof could we get?” asked Banion. “Even if we had this potion right now, it would take substantial time to see its effects, even on a human guinea pig.”

“Well, this has always been the problem,” said Larman, seeming very pensive, sipping his coffee. “I would expect that this mystery seller would need to produce some form of proof he had the complete formula, and some evidence that it actually works.”

“I doubt he would give us the formula to prove he had it,” said Guillard, laughing and making a swipe in the air with his arm. “Nor would he give us testimonials from people who took gohida ama, I imagine.”

“No, you are right on both counts,” answered Larman. “But perhaps there is a middle ground of some sort.”

“Middle grounds are for fools, especially when we talk in terms of millions of dollars,” responded Guillard. “This mystery person must think we are fools.”

Rod looked around the room. Everyone seemed focused on Larman, who was jotting down notes on a pad. The whole idea of finding gohida ama that meant anything seemed at a dead end, thought Rod.

Here’s what I might suggest,” said Larman, with a slow cadence and a professorial delivery. “We simply ask this mystery seller for some proof before payment. Say, he gives us part of the formula, and we have a brief chance to analyze it with some experts. As for its effectiveness at reversing the aging process, well that’s a tough one. He or she must have thought of how the potion would be verified. We could throw that burden of proof back on the mystery seller. Bottom line is that failure to satisfy us will mean no money lost.”

Guillard laughed out loud. Rod perceived it was a fake expression of mocking Larman.

“You can propose foolish maneuvers, Mr. Kingfund, since it appears that Alliance will be the source of these millions, and I don’t see your client having any exposure at all.”

“No monetary exposure for this payment, correct,” said Larman. “But you must know that my client is Leonard Hippa, the foremost scientist on cell

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mechanics, and the biological switches that control aging. This gohida ama most likely deals with this phenomena, and Professor Hippa would be your main source for determining if this formula has any merit at all.”

Banion turned to Guillard. “We could check this man out, Anton. I have heard the name, and I believe he has written a number of articles in the field. We can check with our people. Professor Hippa may be of value to us.”

“And don’t forget the written agreement we have, Banion, to share the profits on this endeavor,” added Larman.

“That was before we got this note, and before the code talker was killed,” retorted Banion, looking at Guillard.

“Of course, the situation has changed,” responded Guillard.

“Nothing in the agreement talks about any change in our knowledge, gentlemen,” said Larman, looking across the room.

Banion and Guillard looked at each other. Banion made a slight motion with his hand, and turned back to Larman. “We will need to consult further before Wednesday, Larman. This situation is much different than a week ago, and the dollars are gigantic, even for Alliance. If we go ahead, we’ll let you know tomorrow over what our minimum terms will be.”

“Fair enough,” responded Larman. Mixie looked at Rod, but neither spoke. The adventure might soon be over, thought Rod.

Banion rose from his seat, followed by Guillard, and both men excused themselves for further discussion, and communication with their main offices. Senator Eddelburg did not join them, but asked for another cup of coffee, which surprised Rod.

“I need to get back to Washington, of course,” volunteered the senator. “But I’m feeling somewhat tired these days. Hopefully, we can find this gohida ama soon, for I may not last too many more months.”

Rod looked at Mixie, again. He had not heard the senator talk like this before.

“You’re too mean to die,” responded Larman, smiling at the senator.

“Every man’s days are numbered,” responded the senator, now in a serious tone, “and, unfortunately, my number is getting down to a small figure.”

Larman, appearing to want to change the subject, said, “I’m somewhat surprised you are so aligned with Alliance Pharmaceuticals, senator, knowing your many other concerns.”

The senator responded, “Well, they have been a substantial contributor to my campaigns in the past, of course, but my current health problems have made this project somewhat imperative, as you can imagine. They are a powerful company, and I’ve found it advantageous to help them, and they have been enthusiastic in their generosity to me.”

“And they have promised you that you would be the first human tester, if they ever found the formula?” asked Rod, trying to substantiate what he had heard before.

“Yes, and in my case, it would be a last-ditch effort, so the scientific protocols would be avoided. Probably would be a secret test, since the publicity would not be favorable, and it would be illegal.”

“What if Alliance went back on its promises to you?” asked Mixie.

“That would be unfortunate,” answered Senator Eddelburg, “since the promises have been substantial, and the company has gotten significant benefits from my assistance, especially in Congress. And actually, that question is the reason I have stayed behind. I need to talk to you, Larman, when we are done here.”

“About what?” asked Larman.

“About your services as confidential representative of me concerning my relationship with Alliance.”

Rod knew that the conversation was leading to his cue to leave the meeting. He and Mixie stood up. Rod looked at Larman and said, “Larman, Mixie and I need to do some business. Let us know what we can do, if anything, about the next step with the mystery seller.”

“After hearing from Banion, I will get back to both of you. Maybe it will be with tickets to New York,” said Larman.

“Hopefully, we have another chance at this gohida ama,” said Senator Eddelburg, standing and shaking the hand of Rod and Mixie. The two associates left the room, and headed for their respective cars parked along the street.

“This case is getting stranger and stranger,” said Mixie as they walked down the sidewalk.

“So strange, it’s leaving the realm of reality,” said Rod. “I think the whole thing will go away in the next several days, and we can get back to New York.”

“Oh, I thought you might stay here in Calhoun,” she said, with a smirk.

“Possibly,” he said. “Or I might return in a year or so.”

“You might be better here,” she said, “The pace would certainly be slower, and you wouldn’t need to get into these high stress cases. I personally like the action in New York, and hopefully Larman will give me a good word at the firm, after this effort.”

“This effort has produced nothing for the client,” responded Rod. “But you did go through a lot, I guess,” he said, trying to limit the credit he was giving.

Rod got to his car, and inserted his key into the driver’s side door. He looked up, and Mixie had stopped, apparently not wanting to end the conversation.

“Going to see the maiden?” she asked with a sly smile.

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“If you mean Gerri, yes. I was thinking I owed her a visit.”

“She’s probably working, or out with the gang, I would assume,” she answered.

“Yea, I’ll probably stop at her shop,” he said.

“I have much business to do with the firm,” she answered, and headed for her car.

Rod watched her walk down the sidewalk. The next few days will decide a great deal, he thought.

###

Chapter Eighteen

Searching for the Truth

Rod received his call from Larman about four the next day.

“I’ve talked to Banion a few minutes ago,” said Larman from the other end of the call. “We’re meeting in two days over here to talk final strategy. Apparently, Alliance is willing to take the next step.”

Rod thought it strange that Alliance would move ahead, especially after witnessing the reaction of Anton Guillard the day before. On the other hand, it had made no commitments, and could walk away at any time. The key, thought Rod, would be whether this mystery seller of gohida ama could actually produce anything of any value to show the whole promise had any validity. That would be a tough act, he knew. In the meantime, it looks like a few days of rest and relaxation, he mused. And it was a chance to relax and to spend some time with Gerri. She was in a good mood these days, since she just got promoted to manager of the gift shop. She kept asking Rod what his long-range plans were these days, but he stayed as ambiguous as possible. There was a nice candlelight dinner, and a pizza party, fun in its own way for Rod. He enjoyed Gerri’s company, and he was thinking to himself it should be more long term now.

Monday morning came soon enough, and Rod and Mixie showed up at the designated hour at Larman’s house. Sitting around a coffee table in the center of the room, Rod could see the Alliance contingency, headed by Banion and Anton Guillard. The senator was missing, probably back in Washington for a few days, thought Rod. There was another individual sitting next to Guillard who Rod did not know.

Banion stood up when Rod and Mixie entered the room. “Mixie, meet our biologist, Dr. Hapton. He’s from our Maryland labs.” Rod was slightly taken back by the introduction of Mixie only, but he stepped forward and shook Dr. Hapton’s hand. “Yes, and I’m her assistant Rod Larren,” he said, looking directly at Dr. Hapton.

“Oh, yes, and Rod Larren,” said Banion, as an obvious afterthought.

Larman moved several more chairs into the living room, and brought out several cocktails for his guests. “Now, let’s go over the game plan for everyone’s benefit,” said Larman.

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Rod observed that no prerequisite information to the effect that Alliance was in the game would be forthcoming. Such an introduction was assumed at this point, but Rod knew there had been discussions with Larman before he and Mixie arrived.

Anton Guillard took over the leadership for the conversation at this point. "Let me be concise and to the point, here," he began. "We have the money, if need be. The details will be worked out later. Nevertheless, this is our last attempt to get this so-called formula, and we will not be duped by some con man. What I'm saying is that our top executives are insisting on two things before any money will be released to this mystery man. First, we must have some proof that this gohida ama actually works. That will be the big hurdle. Second, we'll need to have Dr. Hapton, here, and probably your client, Professor Hippa, verify that whatever we get from this guy has some merit."

"It could be a mystery woman," said Mixie.

Guillard went on with his terms. "I don't know how these two conditions can be proven to us to the point we are willing to release fifty million dollars to some guy we don't know, but I'll let this mystery person figure it out."

"Then we will put the flag up on Wednesday, is that what I'm hearing?" asked Larman, surveying the group.

"Yes, that seems to be our current position," answered Banion.

"O.K.," affirmed Larman, "I'll contact Professor Hippa, and make sure he's available, if needed."

Mixie asked, "What do we need to figure out before Wednesday?"

"Nothing. Larman will put up the flag, as arranged. At that point, our mystery seller will need to contact Larman. When he does so, Larman will need to get our terms to him. Let him figure out the details," said Banion.

The various participants talked among themselves, mostly about current events, and then about thirty minutes later the meeting broke up. Rod and Mixie stayed after the meeting to discuss the day's meeting with Larman, and then they, too, left to await tomorrow's reaction to the flag being raised in the morning.

"I'm going shopping," called out Mixie as she walked to her car, now parked far down the street.

"I'm going to take a nap," responded Rod, as he opened the door to his car.

"This is like closing a big deal," she said with a laugh, as she slid into her car.

Rod watched her drive away. She still puzzles me, he thought.

Rod headed to his apartment, and did, in fact, lay down, and was soon asleep. A ring awakened him on his phone, and he finally answered it after the fourth

ring. It was Larman, and Rod was surprised to see that it was already nine on Wednesday morning. He really must have been tired, he thought.

Larman said on the phone, “ I already have had a telephone call with our seller, apparently from some throwaway cell phone.”

“What did he say?” asked Rod.

“It wasn’t a long conversation,” said Larman, “He probably was concerned we could figure out some way to trace the call. He did seem to agree to the two conditions. Apparently, he thought about them before today.”

“What did he suggest?” responded Rod, now feeling the sudden excitement.

“Said he would give us the name and location of one of the successful users of the potion, and would figure out a way to give us the formula for review.”

“Wow,” said Rod. “How would he do that? If he gives us the formula, why pay any money to him, at all?” asked Rod.

Larman chuckled. “Oh, I think he would present the formula in some form where it wouldn’t be fully useful to us.”

“So what’s the next step?” asked Rod.

“Our seller said he would get us the name of a successful user of gohida ama. I guess we wait for that.”

Rod was somewhat dumbfounded after he hung up the phone with Larman. This guy is actually moving this thing forward, he thought. It seems ridiculous, the whole thing, he mused. But then again, it was now like an extended vacation. Why not enjoy it?

Rod went down to the gym several blocks from his apartment, but during his workout, his cell phone rang. “Larman here,” came the voice on the other end. “Our seller is a quick worker. I’ve already received an email from him, with instructions on how to find the successful user of gohida ama. I’ve asked for a trace on the email, but I expect it was sent from a public library, or something like that.”

“Is his successful guinea pig someone around here?” asked Rod, somewhat incredulously.

“Have a general address outside Atlanta. Apparently, we need to contact him through his granddaughter, and it must be totally confidential, or everything shuts down,” continued Larman.

“How will we proceed then?” asked Rod, hoping he would be part of the process.

“I talked to Banion a few minutes ago. He suggested that I contact the granddaughter, give her this password the caller gave me, and then set up a meeting down at a location near Atlanta. I have no exact address for this person, but I do have the telephone number of the granddaughter. Once we make

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contact, Banion and Dr. Hapton will represent Alliance, and you and I will represent our client.”

That won't play well with Mixie, thought Rod. He asked, “What about Mixie?”

“I have another important job for Mixie,” said Larman. “It involves the next stage of this process.”

Rod felt good that he was going to be part of this adventure, but knew if it fizzled, as he expected, it would be the end of the entire experience in Calhoun with Larman and the firm. It also would end the stay with Mixie, which Rod admitted to himself was very enjoyable, even though they weren't always on the same wavelength.

Rod ended the call with Larman, and ran to take a shower. This was getting exciting, he thought, and I want to be ready to go at a moment's notice. He left the gym and headed for his apartment, grabbing a couple of hamburgers on the way. He was very hungry all of a sudden.

When he got back to his apartment, he found Larman waiting next to his car in the parking lot. Why didn't he let me know he was coming? wondered Rod.

“Rod, I was meeting with Banion after we talked, and we contacted a Mary Hilltop, who is the contact our caller gave me. She said she had been advised we would be calling, and she could find her grandfather from some undisclosed location, and he could be available for a meeting tomorrow morning. We need to fly down to Atlanta this afternoon. Will that work for you?”

“Of course,” answered Rod. “Let me get a few things together, and I'm ready to go.” Things were not always slow and predictable with Larman. But of course, he was the prominent partner at Kellog & Hood in New York. He didn't get to that status without a reason, Rod knew.

Rod and Larman met Banion and Dr. Hapton at the airport, and flew to Atlanta, and then travelled to the suburban area of Mableton, near where Larman had arranged to meet the granddaughter the next morning. They checked into a motel in the area, and had dinner together.

The restaurant was above the motel in a somewhat scenic area. There was farmland not far from here, and Larman, nor anyone else present, knew where his mystery user of this potion was coming from. The only information that Larman had passed to the others was that the granddaughter would bring this man to an eleven o'clock meeting in one of the conference rooms of the motel. It had been arranged that only the present group from Alliance, and Rod and Larman would be allowed to talk to the man; and the mystery seller had made it clear to Larman that all communications with the man would be without cameras or recording devices, and no other people would be allowed to meet

him. The requirements seemed stringent to Rod, but he knew it made no sense to attempt to grab the man, or violate the conditions. Such action would only deter the mystery seller from further contact, at least in theory. Rod realized that Banion and Dr. Hapton would cooperate with the conditions, so their impressions would be extremely important. Though no one had the impression that this mystery man could meaningfully be examined since no doctor was to be present, Rod learned from Dr. Hapton that he would attempt some simple tests regarding the mystery man.

The eleven o'clock hour came quickly, and Rod and Larman sat behind a table at one end of one small conference room at the motel. Banion and Dr. Hapton sat across the room behind another table. Between them were several chairs, in what seemed a very awkward arrangement to Rod. At exactly eleven o'clock, a knock occurred on the door, and an old woman walked into the room.

Larman, looking up, said, "Ma'am, this room is being used."

The old woman took several steps into the room, and looked around at each of the people sitting in front of her. She checked a small wristwatch she was wearing.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I thought I was meeting with a Mr. Kingfund this morning." She turned slowly, obviously in some pain, and started to walk back to the door.

"Hold it, ma'am," said Larman, "I'm Larman Kingfund." He jumped up from his chair and walked over to the old lady, and took her arm. He led her into the room, and said, "I'm sorry ma'am. I thought we were expecting a younger woman." He felt awkward, and led her to one of the chairs in the middle of the room.

"Most women are younger than I am," she said, as she struggled to sit down. "My name is Mary Hilltop. My impression was that you were to meet my grandfather today."

Rod looked around the room. Banion was staring at Dr. Hapton, and Larman was trying to take the comment in stride. He smiled at the old lady, and asked, "Might I call you Mary?"

"You may," she said.

"Mary, would you be offended if I asked you how old you are?"

"103 years young, I guess."

Larman looked over at Banion. This was a joke, thought Rod. This woman actually looked like she could be 103, but that would preclude any grandfather, of course.

"Though first," said Mary, "I must know who each of you are. Do you have any identification?"

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This old lady is asking us for identification, that is something, thought Rod, as he pulled out his wallet and handed his driver's license to her. The other people in the room did the same.

"All right, I assume there are no recording devices in this room, is that correct?" she asked.

Larman answered, "No, we have followed the directions given to us."

"Excellent," said Mary. "Now we can go meet my grandfather."

"...Go meet?" asked Larman.

Yes, down at the end of the hall, there is another room. We need to go down there to meet with him."

This woman should work for the CIA, thought Rod.

She got up from her seat, and slowly walked to the door. She opened the door and turned to Larman. My grandfather has farm work to do, let's get this done," she said, with some irritation.

The four members of the buying group followed the old lady down the hall and into the end room. As they walked into the room, an old man was sitting on a metal folding chair, with an apparent oxygen tank next to him. He appeared to be in poor health, and looked up slowly as the visitors followed the old lady into the room. As they each found a chair and sat down, the old lady turned to Larman, and said, "My grandfather is in poor health, and needs to get back to the farm in an hour. You will only have twenty minutes to talk to him."

"I'm not sure what we can accomplish in twenty minutes," said Larman, while looking at Banion. "We need some specific evidence regarding your grandfather, like his name, address, social security number, etc. We also need to take a picture of him for our records."

"We need to examine him," interjected Dr. Hapton.

"You have twenty minutes," said Mary. "At that point, we have a ride to pick him up, and we will be leaving."

"O.K.," said Banion, appearing to get anxious. "We'll abide by your rules, but your grandfather must answer our questions."

"He can answer some, I assume," she said, but his mind isn't as good anymore."

Rod suspected this was a well-rehearsed scam. Larman may have been thinking the same, but was willing to play the game, and Banion was ready to expose the fraud.

"What's your name, sir," asked Larman.

"Thomas Red Cloud. Yes, it's Thomas Red Cloud," he repeated. His mind seemed foggy.

"And when were you born?" asked Banion, taking notes on a pad in his lap.

“It was just before the Civil War, I think around 1850,” he said, scratching his baldhead.

Banion looked over at Larman. “Are you telling us you were born in 1850, is that correct?” asked Banion. “Mr. Red Cloud, we weren’t born yesterday, ourselves, you know.”

After a brief silence in the room, Larman asked the old man, “ And where were you born, sir?”

“In that county....just southeast of Dalton,” Red Cloud answered, though he appeared to be getting more confused.

“Would it be in Dalton?” Larman asked. “Could you say for sure it was in Dalton around 1850?”

“Best of my recollection,” answered Red Cloud.

The old man was slow to answer the questions, and Banion kept staring at his watch, knowing he had much to accomplish in the next few minutes.

“Do you remember the Civil War?” Banion asked, laying down his pad. He smiled at Dr. Hapton, and Dr. Hapton smiled back. The old woman scowled at Banion.

“I remember the men. I remember the marching men,” Red Cloud answered. “And the shooting. I remember the shooting.”

“And your name, was it always Thomas Red Cloud,” asked Banion.

“As long as I can remember,” answered Red Cloud.

“And where were you born, sir?” asked Banion.

“I was born at the McGregor’s Plantation, outside of Dalton,” said Red Cloud.

“Do you recall your mother’s name?” asked Banion. The questions were coming faster now.

“Yes sir,” said the old man. “Her name was Lidy Flowerhill, and I have her picture right here.” Red Cloud pulled out a picture in a small oval locket, and handed it to Banion.

Rod moved over to see the picture. I don’t think there were any photographers around the plantation then, thought Rod. He looked at the picture as Banion handed him the locket.

It was a tiny ink drawing of a woman’s head, but the detail was difficult to ascertain. It looked very old, and the metal casing was heavily tarnished. “Oh, it’s a drawing,” said Rod.

The old man looked at him, but said nothing.

Banion continued his questioning. “And your father’s name?”

“My father was.....” The old man seemed to be dozing off.

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“Grandfather, just a few moments more,” said his granddaughter, and she shook his arm.

“Who was your father?” asked Banion again.

“I did not know my father. He left when I was a boy. I think his name was Long Feather, but I’m not sure. No, I’m not sure.”

Banion continued writing notes on his pad. He looked up at Dr. Hapton, and then continued his questioning.

“And sir, what did you do as a profession? You worked where?”

“I’ve worked as a hired hand. Worked on farms here in Georgia, and up in Tennessee. Can’t remember all the names. No, can’t remember...though I do recall the Hefferton Plantation in Georgia, and the Biggsley farms in Tennessee. That was a while ago, I remember.” The old man started to doze again.

His granddaughter shook his arm. “Grandfather, it will not be long now. Please answer a few more questions.”

Banion saw he was running out of time. He needed to get to the point.

“Mr. Red Cloud, you took some of the Cherokee potion, the drink to make you stop growing old, is that right?” asked Banion.

“Drink? Do I drink?” asked the old man, showing his frailty.

“Do you drink the Cherokee potion to make you live a long time?” repeated Banion.

The old man stared into space, and said nothing.

“The Keetowah drink, grandfather. The Keetowah drink to make you young,” said the granddaughter, raising her voice so the old man could hear. She looked at him, and held his shoulder, as before. The man seemed to have trouble breathing, even with the oxygen tank connected to his nostrils.

“Oh, Keetowah drink....yes, gohida ama” he said. “Drink is strong. Make me live so long. I should have stopped drinking the Keetowah drink,” he said slowly, as he seemed to be reminiscing about ancient thoughts.

“You drank the Keetowah drink many times?” asked Banion, now sensing he was getting to the heart of the matter. “When did you drink the Keetowah drink?”

“I agreed to take gohida ama many times, when I was already old. Ki-Ta asked me to do it, for the Cherokee Nation...Yes, I did it for them, but I could not tell what I had done.”

“Did you take it before the end of the nineteenth century?” Banion asked, while he wrote feverishly. He got no answer, so he realized he must phrase the question differently.

Banion continued, “Sir, do you remember the great World War...World War I?”

“I remember the great war. One of my grandchildren was killed in the war.” A tear could be seen in the corner of the old man’s eye. His granddaughter held his hand, since she realized he was tiring quickly.

“Yes, yes, I remember the war. Many people were killed. But I was old, and didn’t go to war,” Red Cloud continued.

“Did you drink gohida ama before the great war?” asked Banion.

“Many times before the war, many times and many years before the war. And only a few times since the war. I ran out of gohida ama, and that was it,” said Red Cloud.

“Why were you the one to drink gohida ama?” asked Banion.

The old man was going back into his stupor.

The granddaughter shook him slightly. “Only several more minutes,” she said as she looked at Banion. Rod could see some sweat beads on Banion’s forehead. He must be taking some of this seriously, thought Rod.

“Why did they choose you to drink the potion?” asked Banion again.

The old man stared at the wall. Finally, he looked up at Banion, and said. “I killed the Chief’s son. It was my punishment.”

“Your punishment?” asked Banion.

“Living for more than a hundred and fifty years is your punishment?” he said, touching the old man’s hand. Banion had moved from his seat, and was now staring in the man’s face from a foot away.

“Yes....yes, my punishment,” Red Cloud said slowly. “I did not get crazy like the others who drank gohida ama, but I lived for too many years. Too many years to forget. All my family except my granddaughter here are gone. All my friends are gone. This is my punishment. Too much punishment.....Too much punishment.” The old man was slipping into a stupor again.

Dr. Hapton moved forward toward the old man. “We need his picture and a fingerprint,” he said, as he sensed the interview would soon be over. “I also need a dab of his skin.”

“Do it quickly,” said the granddaughter, “for we must be leaving now. Do not follow us, for that will be the end of your story.”

Dr. Hapton took several photographs of the old man, who was now sleeping in his chair, and breathing heavily. He followed with some skin removal, and held several of the old man’s fingers against an electronic device, apparently recording the pattern of the fingerprints.

Upon completing his gathering of personal information from Red Cloud, Dr. Hapton stepped back and looked at Banion. “I have what I need,” he said.

The granddaughter left the room momentarily, and returned quickly with a wheel chair and a young man accompanied her. The young man picked up Red

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Cloud, put him in the wheelchair, and carried the oxygen tank and apparatus as the granddaughter slowly pushed the wheelchair out of the room.

“Well, thank you ma’am...and thank your grandfather,” said Larman, since no one else in the room seemed to be talking. What they had seen caused a certain amount of deep thought.

“You’re welcome, gentlemen,” said the old lady. “Do not try to contact us again, and do not follow us. You will ruin everything for yourselves.”

The door closed behind the woman.

Larman, who had gotten up as she was leaving, sat down again. Banion was sitting in his chair, staring at the wall. Dr. Hapton was organizing his materials. Rod was surveying each of them, and was thinking how strange this whole day had been. The acting, if it was acting, was spectacular, he thought. The story was so incredible, he mused, that the highest quality acting was, of course, necessary.

Finally, Banion, let out a deep breath, and said, “Well, that was a performance. No doubt about it. But, gentlemen, it will be easy to destroy this story with a little research and digging into some of these things that this Red Cloud has told us. And I assure you, we will dig. Our resources are now in high gear. Yes, we will dig.”

###

Chapter Nineteen

Verifying the Proof

Rod knew there would be tremendous activity on the Alliance Pharmaceutical side of the equation after the meeting near Atlanta. He got back to Calhoun at about nine at night because of some weather delays in the flight, but Larman had advised as they parted upon landing that it would be a few days before he expected any follow-up actions by Alliance. That was O.K. with Rod, since it gave him a chance to catch up on some duties at the firm in New York, and spend more time with Gerri at her house in Calhoun.

On the third day after the Atlanta trip, Rod was jogging near his apartment when his phone rang. It was Larman.

“Hey, Rod, I just heard from our mystery seller, but I can’t get hold of Banion. You haven’t seen him, have you?”

“He may have gone back to Maryland for meetings,” said Rod.

“No, I know he’s back in town,” said Larman, “and I saw Dr. Hapton here yesterday.”

“We need to get together with the Alliance guys this evening,” said Larman. “I’ll keep trying to make contact. Why don’t you plan to stop over around seven? I’ll let Mixie know, too. She just got back into town, herself.”

Rod thought Larman seemed excited. It was the sound of his voice that Rod hadn’t heard before. Something was happening that even shakes up the old boss, he thought, smiling as he hung up the phone. He was curious what Mixie had been doing out of town, but there was too much to think about concerning the upcoming meeting than to worry about Mixie.

Rod got to the seven o’clock meeting on time, but again saw he was the last one there. Mixie had made it, and was looking exceptional in a new pink dress and red shoes. Banion was there in a dark suit, while Dr. Hapton was more casual, with a plaid shirt and khaki pants. This time Anton Guillard was present, so Rod surmised that something big was happening.

Rod looked up at Larman, who was tending a small bar in the back of the room, taking drink orders before the formal business began.

“Well, here’s where we are,” said Banion, breaking a temporary silence. “Our staff has been checking out all of the information which Red Cloud gave us

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down in Atlanta, including his picture, fingerprints, and skin samples. Couldn't find any fingerprints on record, but that doesn't surprise us. Skin samples didn't give us much except to say they came from a very old person."

Banion stopped his report. He looked at Anton Guillard for several seconds, and then continued. "Incredibly, it all checks out. Everything checks out."

"Everything checks out?" asked Larman, not sure he heard correctly.

"Yes, everything. The details are sketchy, of course, but the basic facts seem to check out," responded Banion.

Rod stared at Banion. He, too, was amazed. "Everything checked out?" he asked again.

"We certainly had to dig, no doubt about that," continued Banion. "But we found records of the family and servants for the Hefferton Plantation in Georgia, and there was a reference to a child born in 1850 and named 'T. Red Cloud'. We found a reference to a child with that name in the school in that area in 1858. We also found a reference to a 'Red Cloud, hand' in some old family records for the Biggsley Farms in Tennessee. Found an old marriage license for a T. Red Cloud in 1874 in Madison County, Georgia. Don't see any social security number or driver's license, but the old man might not have had need for those."

"But how do we know that this old man is the same person as the old records set forth?" asked Rod.

"We don't for sure, but we can't disprove it either," said Banion. "We did find something interesting in the records of Beckett County, near Atlanta. It shows some old census records from 1900 that list one Thomas Red Cloud in 1900 at an address on Selover Road in Kellston, Georgia. It lists him as 49 years old in 1900. Following the census records, and a few of the voting registration records over the next hundred years, show this Thomas Red Cloud, at different ages, matching the general area of residence. The ages keep getting older, but at age 99, the subsequent records continue to show this person as having the age of 99, even though many more years pass."

"What about neighbors, like observers who know this man now. What do they say?" asked Rod.

"We've talked to a few people in the local community over there who recall the old guy back twenty or more years ago, but it doesn't seem like he has any friends who know him today, at least who we can come up with," continued Banion. "We thought we would find some medical records, but that's difficult because all of the federal privacy regulations."

"We're still digging, that's for sure," interjecting Guillard.

“So, where does that leave us?” asked Larman, now sitting in the last chair left unoccupied.

“We haven’t abandoned this project quite yet. That’s where we are. Not overly excited, but not giving up our quest for this gohida ama,” answered Banion.

“This boondoggle will be the end to a number of our careers,” said Guillard, staring at Banion. “Unfortunately, I thought we could put it to rest several weeks ago, and certainly after you fellows had that interview with that guy down near Atlanta. Unfortunately, we haven’t put the curtain down quite yet.”

“No, not quite yet. We want to play out the second condition first. Larman, can you contact this mystery seller and get us some evidence of what this substance might be...like what does the formula actually look like, and what are some of the ingredients?”

Larman answered, “Don’t know what we can get, Banion. Our mystery seller, as you call him, needs to get back to us now. He is in the driver’s seat. We have no idea with whom we have been communicating.”

“He must know we have finished our meeting with Red Cloud,” said Rod.

“I assume so, but we are now in a waiting game,” continued Larman. “Anyone for a few snacks and drinks?”

There was no immediate response to Larman’s question. Everyone seemed in deep thought over the last conversation.

Mixie, who had said nothing, looked up at Banion and asked, “Banion, how can you expect this mystery seller to hand over the formula for inspection, since that will eliminate any chance of his or her getting paid for the formula. Copying it will be easy.”

Larman, seeing his question about eating had been momentarily ignored, responded, “Of course Mixie, getting the complete formula probably is not a possibility. I don’t know what ingenuity our caller may exhibit, but the ball is in his court, of course.”

As he poured several glasses of wine on the counter in front of him, Larman continued, “And Banion, we certainly assume that you and your financial people at Alliance have the money ready to wire upon the satisfaction of these conditions. I assume everything will move quickly.”

The statement seemed to take Anton Guillard by surprise. “We’re a long way from sending any company money anywhere,” he said, somewhat defensively.

“The money will be available, when the proof is there,” interjected Banion. “Now, let’s eat and enjoy ourselves.”

At that point, Larman’s cell phone rang. He pulled it from his shirt pocket and answered it. All eyes were on him, as he listened to the caller. He hung up

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the call without saying anything further. He appeared to be thinking momentarily, and then looked up at the group.

“We just got a message from our mystery seller,” he said, and the message was to check my computer screen for a message.” Larman moved across the room, picked up his laptop, and opened the cover, studying the screen. Banion walked over to view the screen with him.

There was an email noted on the screen. It read:

“On Sunday at three o’clock in the morning, there will be a message on your computer screen which will set forth the formula for gohida ama. It will be on the screen for only twenty-five seconds, and will then disappear. You will not be able to copy it. Make sure your computer is on, and have your experts present to analyze the formula. It is too complex to copy; so don’t attempt to do so, since the critical parts are near the end of the formula. Upon verifying that the formula looks real, I will expect payment for the full formula and sample of gohida ama within three days according to my future instructions. It will need to be fully liquid and must be irrevocably wired according to these instructions.”

The others in the room approached the screen to look at the message. Mixie grabbed a pencil and paper from the adjacent table and started to copy the message. After about twenty seconds, the message disappeared from the screen.

“How did he do that?” asked Guillard.

“I don’t know,” said Banion, but I’m going to get our tech guys to find out. It’s probably the same technology he’s planning to use to give us a glimpse of the formula, and he doesn’t know how good our tech guys are at figuring this out. I think we can short circuit his plans.”

“We’ll be ready this time,” said Guillard. “I expect we need to have all our resources available in case this guy really has something.”

“Yes,” responded Larman. “And you better have your biologist and chemist ready to review that formula within twenty-five seconds, if need be. I will call Professor Hippa to be here, and be ready. He’s the foremost expert in this field.”

Now the arrangements really needed to be prepared, thought Rod. Now the excitement would be accelerating.

“It might be advantageous for us to get the police involved here, in some capacity,” said Guillard. “Just in case this is some kind of fraud.”

“That would be risky,” said Larman. “It could scare away our seller and your chances to get this formula.”

“Well, I’m certainly going to have involvement with our private security people, especially if we get to the point of passing any large amounts of money.”

The week moved quickly, and Rod was amazed at all the new faces around Larman's house. He assumed they were personnel of some sort provided by Alliance Pharmaceuticals, and there were a group of technicians working on Larman's computer equipment, attaching all sorts of appliances. Rod wasn't sure of what all of it was, but he knew the stakes were getting sky high. Even Detective Lonebird called Rod several times to find out how things were going. The detective knew something was in the works, but still felt some guilt for the shooting of Johnny Firetree. Rod had several dates with Gerri, and she was telling him of a new job offer in Kansas City, working for a supplier of gift items she had contacted in her new job at the shop. The world moves on, thought Rod, regardless of what I'm involved in at the moment. Something's going to happen, or nothing's going to happen with this investigation. But whatever evolves, thought Rod, it will culminate soon. Then I'll need to get my life back in order, he said to himself.

Saturday was a busy day around Larman's place. Everyone was given their assignment, and all of the technology was in place. Now it was just a short time to wait, Rod knew. Larman seemed relaxed, but Banion kept pacing the floor, yelling at various assistants from Alliance Pharmaceuticals. Mixie was on her computer most of the afternoon, and was on her cell phone the rest of the time. She obviously was getting cabin fever, and was counting down the minutes until this project was over.

"Doesn't this thing drive you crazy, Roddy?" she asked just before the evening dinner was to be served.

"Well, it is tiring, I admit," said Rod, "but it's almost over. If the circumstances weren't so unbelievable, and the possibilities such a long shot, I would want to get back to New York, too. But the drama here is worth the time."

Rod ate a small meal, but he wasn't hungry. The anticipation for the early morning scheduled contact from the mysterious seller kept him on edge. It seemed to have the same effect on the others he observed pacing around Larman's living room. Finally, about midnight, after getting in a game of chess with one of the technicians, Rod sat on the couch and fell asleep. At about two thirty Sunday morning, Rod felt someone shaking his arm.

"Rod, it's about time," said Larman. Mixie was sitting next to him on the couch, covered with a blanket she had gotten from Larman. She looked tired, and Rod suspected she hadn't slept as well as he did. Banion was arranging some computer equipment and had several tablets of yellow lined paper in front of him on the table. Dr. Hapton and Professor Hippa, who had arrived on Friday, sat near the front of Larman's computer, ready to read any messages that came

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across the screen. Other than several comments between some of the Alliance Pharmaceutical technicians, everyone else was quiet, waiting for the anticipated communication.

Rod checked his watch. Now it was two fifty-five, and the scheduled contact was only five minutes away. This would be a critical moment. Rod knew that the entire operations could blow up, or perhaps there would be no contact at all.

The clock in the hall chimed on the hour. It was three and all eyes were on the computer screen.

Banion said in a soft voice, “Dr. Hapton and Professor Hippa, we’re counting on you to get as much detail in your minds from any formula disclosures. Don’t worry about our efforts to trace this signal or copy it, that will be our problem.”

Rod checked his watch. There was no signal on the screen and it was now almost five minutes after the hour. Then some interference came across the blue screen of the computer, but nothing more. Larman checked his watch. Banion began pacing the floor.

“This is going to be an expensive joke,” he said, and walked around the back of the room. Rod thought he might be getting sick.

Then a buzzing noise occurred. Everyone in the room jumped back.

“It’s the doorbell,” said Larman. Everyone looked at Larman. What does this mean? thought Rod, as he watched Larman go down the hall towards the front door.

In several minutes, Larman returned, as everyone stared in his direction. Behind him was a short man with a blue denim shirt, and a blue cap. He was carrying a laptop computer.

“This man says he was hired to bring this computer to us at exactly three o’clock and show it to us for only a short time. Apparently, he has some code which will activate the computer.”

“What the.....?” said Banion. Guillard looked at the man with the computer in horror.

Larman looked at Banion, Guillard and Senator Eddelburg, who had joined the group at about nine last night. “We’re dealing with quite a smart fellow, after all, gentlemen.”

“I don’t know what this is all about,” said the short man, “but my instructions were to leave in five minutes and take my computer with me. And if I don’t do it just like I was told, I’m not getting the thousand dollars, that was clear.”

“O.K., understood,” said Larman, grabbing the computer from the man and placing it on the table in front of Dr. Hapton and Professor Hippa. “Gentlemen,

now is the time to concentrate.” Larman looked over at the short man, and gave him a hand signal waving down at the laptop computer the man had brought. “Go ahead sir, get it going for us.”

The short man sat down next to Dr. Hapton, and punched several keys on the computer, and then slid off the chair. Professor Hippa moved over into the chair, and Dr. Hapton and Professor Hippa stared at the screen. There was a sequence of screens with various chemical and word formulas, with a list of several ingredients. Rod could see that the screens moved rather quickly, and he had no hope of comprehending the material. Professor Hippa wrote furiously on his pad, but Dr. Hapton stared in deep concentration, trying to get the most out of the presentation. After several minutes, the formula screens disappeared, and another screen flashed unto the computer. Rod could read this message.

It read:

“Now you know that this formula is possible, and it is real. I will contact you shortly to arrange for the wiring of the fifty million dollars.”

Guillard sat stunned on the couch. Banion was shaking his head. Rod looked at Mixie, and she was sitting on the chair in the corner with her mouth open in amazement. The technicians were running around, one tried to grab the laptop from the table.

“I wouldn’t do that, if I were you,” the short man said in a stern voice. “I have instructions to leave with the computer immediately, and if I don’t come out right away, I suspect any deal you have will be terminated. In any event, the message has already disappeared from the computer. That’s what they told me.”

“They?” said Banion.

The man disregarded the question from Banion, but grabbed the computer, and headed down the hall in the direction of the front door. Two men sitting in the corner of the room jumped up and held the short man by the arms, causing him to almost drop the laptop he was carrying.

“Let him go,” called out Banion. “We can’t risk closing down this deal quite yet.”

Banion’s assistants dropped the short man’s arms, and he raced down the hall, and out of the house. Banion went over to the window, and watched him jog down the street.

“You’re having him followed, aren’t you?” asked Guillard.

Banion looked back at Guillard and said, “Yes, I have several of our men following him, but I don’t expect it will bear any fruit. I’m sure he was hired, and his computer and his identity most likely will be of little value to us in the short run.”

“That man looked Cherokee to me,” said Mixie.

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“That may be the case, Mixie, but he is not part of the operations of this mystery seller. Only a participant in the mechanics of delivery,” continued Larman.

There were several seconds of silence, and then Banion turned back toward Dr. Hapton and Professor Hippa. “So, gentlemen, what do you think?”

“Well, it’s hard to say for sure,” answered Dr. Hapton, “but the formula and the notes were not foolish gibberish. They followed some very real scientific procedures and the nomenclature was definitely scholarly.”

“Yes,” added Professor Hippa, “much of the material followed chemistry that we have experimented with in connection with cell switching and preservation chemistry. Unfortunately, I couldn’t comprehend enough in that short time to say for sure that it would work, but it definitely is fascinating.”

“So,” said Banion, now appearing more excited, “you think this might not be a fraud?”

“But how can we know for sure?” interjected Guillard. “This is not enough to pay fifty million dollars to someone for.”

“I understand,” said Professor Hippa, “It looks promising, but I can’t tell for sure.”

“I don’t know for sure, either,” said Dr. Hapton. “It was so quick, but I didn’t see anything that would assure me it’s a hoax. I’m not the expert that Professor Hippa is, however, and I would defer to any opinion he might have.”

Banion and Guillard looked at Professor Hippa.

“I only wish I had the funds to make the acquisition,” said Professor Hippa, “but I can’t tell you what to do. It’s your fifty million dollars.”

Guillard grabbed Banion by the arm. “We need to talk about this, in private.”

So much for the full partnership, thought Rod.

“I doubt whether the company would even consider such a payment,” said Guillard, as he picked up his coat from the chair in the corner of the room. “We need to make a number of calls, Banion. We would need some guarantees from the senator, of course. We will let you know on Monday morning, Larman.”

With that, Guillard stomped out into the hall, and Banion picked up his briefcase and followed him.

“Larman, don’t get optimistic about all of this. There is too little here and too much to lose,” said Banion, as he walked out the door.

Senator Eddeburg followed behind him, whispering something in his ear.

Larman went to the door, and said to Banion, “Gentlemen, there would be much money lost if this is a hoax. If you don’t proceed, there would be much more money lost if this formula actually exists and is effective.”

Richard Dodge Davidson

Rod walked up behind Larman, as he stood in the doorway. He could see the moonlight reflecting on Larman's face, as his boss watched the men leaving.

Larman noticed Rod standing behind him, and he turned, rubbing his chin with his hand.

“You know Rod, this is the best darn case I've had.”

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Chapter Twenty

Moving Towards Culmination

It was another night of sporadic sleep for Rod. A great deal was swirling around him and his mind stayed too active for meaningful rest. This was a great fraud, or a moment in history like no other, thought Rod. He awoke early, and decided to take a jog around his neighborhood to use some of the nervous energy he now felt. He arranged to stop down and see Gerri before she had to go to work, and they both headed for a quick breakfast.

As they sat in the corner of the local fast food place, Gerri looked at Rod and said, “Rod, you’re awfully tense this morning. Your job must be stressful, though I really don’t know what that job is right now.”

Rod smiled at her. “I’m not sure I do, either,” he said.

She thought for a moment, and then said, “You’ve told me you work for a large law firm in New York City, but you seem to be here all the time. And your schedule is strange. You never seem to work in an office since I’ve known you.”

Gerri clearly was trying to probe this morning, since the mystery surrounding Rob had become more pertinent to her. It was apparently that time in a young woman’s life when her future needed to be clarified, and if it seemed bleak with one guy, it might be the time to turn in another direction.

Rod smiled at Gerri, and gave her a wink. Perhaps this is a stall, he thought, since I’m not sure what to tell her at the moment. I have no idea what next month will bring, nor even tomorrow, he knew. It was an uneasy feeling, but he realized he must play out each minute to find where the next minute will lead.

“I’m sort of thinking about a lot of things right now. Not sure what I will be doing. My job here was just an investigatory assignment, as I have told you. But I sure like it here in Calhoun, and being with you.”

She frowned at him. Rod could perceive she didn’t like his last answer.

Gerri smiled at Rod, and seemed to be thinking of another topic. “My father says you are looking for the fountain of youth, or at least the secret Cherokee potion.”

“Where did he hear about that?” asked Rod, knowing it was no longer much of a secret.

“You know my grandmother was Betsy Satterly, don’t you?”

“Yes, I had heard that,” responded Rod.

Gerri continued, “My parents have been very active in the Cherokee community for some time. My father knows of the Brotherhood, and may even know some of the members. He has spoken of gohida ama a number of times lately, and I know that he has friends who believe the discovery of that potion and how to make it is evil, and the Cherokees have an obligation to prevent such disclosure.”

Rod smiled at her. “Yes, I have an interest in this Cherokee legend, and am working on some research for a client from North Carolina. The disclosure of the formula is something that I do not control, and wonder why such a discovery is such a negative for some of the Cherokees.”

“My ancestors think a life needs a beginning and an end,” she said, “and as seasons come and go, so must a life. The end is as important as the beginning. My father says that to prolong the life’s season will dilute the soul.”

Rod looked at Gerri, thinking about her comments and studying her brown eyes. He would like to talk to her father further, he thought.

“Does your father participate in the activities of the Cherokee Brotherhood?” he asked.

Gerri turned away to look across the room, and then glanced back at Rod, saying nothing for a few seconds.

“My father’s activities are not a concern. I do know, however, that the Brotherhood is adamantly against the disclosure of the gohida ama and will do almost anything to prevent its release to the pharmaceutical industry. I worry about you, Rod. I just think you are deeply involved.”

“Would you like another cup of coffee?” he asked, clearly indicating he wanted to change the subject.

Gerri shook her head indicating a negative answer. She looked away over Rod’s shoulder.

She turned back to him. “There is that associate you work with,” Gerri said in a cool voice, and nodding in the direction to the right behind Rod.

“Associate?” he said, as he turned in his seat. Behind him was Mixie, walking with a tray in her hand.

“Mind if I join you two?” she asked. Before hearing any answer, she slid onto the bench next to Mixie.

“Well, Mixie, I thought you always ate breakfast at the hotel downtown,” said Rod.

“I slum it from time to time,” she answered with a smile. “But, I don’t want to interrupt your breakfast. I can eat at another table,” she said.

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“Oh, that’s not a problem,” said Gerri. “We were talking, but it was a meaningless conversation.”

Rod looked at her, wondering whether she was telling him anything with her comment. His feelings for Mixie were growing stronger the more time he spent with her, and he didn’t want the complexities of the current drama with the gohida ama investigation to force him into a major blunder, when it came to Gerri. And Rod knew that Mixie could be dangerous and he felt uneasy when the two women were together.

“How are things at the shop?” asked Mixie, turning again to Gerri.

“They are a little slow,” responded Gerri with a smile. “I’m considering a job offer in Kansas City.”

So that’s still on the table, thought Rod.

Mixie said, “Both Rod and I are anxious to get back to New York. There is so much action there, and our careers depend on getting back into the firm’s system.”

There were a few seconds of quiet at the table. Gerri broke the silence. “Rod hasn’t mentioned when he was going back,” she said. “I thought his job here might take a bit longer.”

“Don’t know what my plans are, nor where this job will lead,” he said, staring at Mixie.

Gerri finished her coffee, and slipped a half-eaten egg sandwich in its bag. Grabbing the bag, she slid off the bench. “Well, I need to open the shop. Call me tonight, Rod.”

With some haste, Gerri slipped out of the restaurant. Mixie stared at Rod as she drank her coffee. Rod thought for a moment before he spoke.

“Mixie, what brought you to this establishment so early this morning?” he asked.

“Just a coincidence we met,” she answered. “But it did save me a call to you.”

“How so?” he asked, as he drank the last bit of his coffee, and pulled together the paper wrappings on the table.

“Larman called me about twenty minutes ago, and wanted me to get a message to you. Things continue to move quickly with our friends at Alliance, and they want another meeting first thing this afternoon.”

“Where is this meeting to be?” asked Rod, showing some disinterest, but wondering why Larman had not called him directly.

“Banion has reserved a small conference room at the hotel, and will have lunch brought in. Need to be there by one,” she said. “Larman asked me to check on a few things before the meeting, but he wanted to make sure you were available to sit in.”

Rod felt a slow burn pass his forehead, and he smiled slightly. "I'll definitely be there. You won't need to fill me in," he said.

"Then, I'll see you there," she said, as she slid off the bench, and carried her tray to the door and dumped it. Mixie gave a wave, as she slid through the door. Rod thought she looked very preppy today, with her sweater and slacks.

Rod headed back to his apartment, checked his office emails, and watched some daytime television, which helped to numb his brain. His anxiety was now racing, since he sensed everything was coming to a head. What did it all mean? That was the question. He checked his watch, and it was now twelve thirty and time to head down to the hotel. Rod grabbed his coat, and drove several blocks to the side entrance of the hotel. Today he would get Ben, the busboy, to park his car. This would not be a meeting where he was the last one there, as he had been recently.

This time Rod found himself walking into the designated room with Banion, Anton Guillard, and Senator Eddeburg. Larman was already sitting on the couch in the room, sipping what appeared to be a Bloody Mary. Mixie was sitting at the side of the room studying something on her cell phone.

Larman stood up and extended his hand to the incoming participants. "I just got a call from Dr. Hapton, and he will be here shortly with our client, Professor Hippa."

After a few minutes of small talk, everyone gathered around a table in the center of the small conference room. Larman placed a call to the hotel food services, and within several minutes lunch was served. When the staff was excused, Larman turned over the meeting to Banion, who was reading some material on his laptop.

"I won't speak for our biology experts, but I will say that Dr. Hapton was impressed with the professionalism of the material he was able to glean from that brief computer presentation yesterday. Granted, he is relying to a large extent on your client, Dr. Hippa, who he recognizes as the real expert in the room. But, in any event, he didn't see anything yesterday that would make him conclude it was a hoax. That coupled with our research substantiating the possibility that this Thomas Red Cloud could have lived for 150 years raises interesting possibilities for us."

"On the other hand," interjected Guillard, "there certainly is a question whether that old man who called himself Thomas Red Cloud was actually the same guy as the fellow we met with his alleged granddaughter. That certainly is the question for me, though I was taken back by that fingerprint evidence."

"Fingerprint evidence?" said Rod. "I thought that there were no fingerprints on record for anyone around here by the name 'Thomas Red Cloud.'"

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“We found fingerprints on record for a man apparently living near Chattanooga back in 1943. Was part of an application for a part time job in a chemical company during the war. Records show this guy worked there for a year and a half. Had the name Thomas Red Cloud, showed he had been married. We followed with a check of the 1940 census and found that he was living in the area with his daughter and granddaughter. Says nothing about a wife. The granddaughter’s name is Mary, the same name given to us by the old lady claiming to be his granddaughter at our meeting.”

There were a few seconds of silence as the group digested this information, and then Banion continued his presentation. “That being said, we still have major concerns that this entire scenario unfolding in front of us is a major fraud. I can certainly say that the top officers at Alliance believe it is unbelievable, and devoid of any complete verification. That is not to say, however, that we are ready to fold our tent here, and head home.”

“So where does that leave us?” asked Larman.

“We have discussed various scenarios, but there is no total agreement at Alliance as to what we will or will not be able to do here. I would expect that we would let it all play out.”

“Play out?” said Mixie. “What does that mean?”

“It means we will await the next communication from our mystery seller, and continue to lead him or her on. We will bring this situation to a head, and be in a position to pull the plug when necessary.”

“Does that mean you’ll have the fifty million dollars ready to go, if you are ultimately satisfied with the proof provided?” asked Larman.

“We will have the resources available,” responded Banion, “But it will be a superhuman feat to get all the approvals necessary. I doubt that anyone in the position of authority would pull the trigger, but we will be ready, just in case. I do think if there is a small chance this mystery seller is legitimate, that we could blow our chance by holding up, and he or she might move on to the next bidder.”

The conversation seemed to stop at that point, as the participants finished the lunch, and Larman arranged to take away the remnants.

“Any other comments to share?” asked Banion, as he pulled together some papers he had been reviewing as he finished his lunch. Hearing nothing, he rose from his chair, and advised Larman that he should be notified immediately upon any message being passed to Larman by the mystery seller.

“Don’t worry about the time of night,” advised Banion, as Guillard and Dr. Hapton, who had arrived near the end of lunch, all departed for another apparent meeting.

Rod noticed that Senator Eddelburg did not jump up to leave with this group.

“I’ll be along shortly,” the senator called out. “Larman was good enough to get me this marvelous Mary, and I don’t want to waste it. See you in Banion’s suite later.”

After the men left, Senator Eddelburg turned to Larman, and said, “Larman, you are my attorney for certain things we’ve discussed, is that correct?”

“Yes, I believe so,” answered Larman.

“Are you saying your firm represents me for these limited things?” continued the senator.

“Yes,” responded Larman, again.

“And these people here work for you, so there is confidentiality for all of us then, is that right?” asked Senator Eddelburg.

At that point, Professor Hippa, who had arrived late with Dr. Hapton, recognized that he was not needed, and excused himself from the meeting.

As he left, Larman turned back to the senator and said, “Yes, I can tell you there is an attorney client confidentiality among us in this room.”

“Fine,” said the senator. “Larman, if you would be kind enough to order another round of Marys, I want to bounce a few things off of you this afternoon.”

Rod looked at the senator. He didn’t look well, and he talked with a slight stammer. He had been very quiet at the meeting to that point, and Rod surmised he had something else on his mind.

Larman produced a round of drinks, but Mixie and Rod refused the offer, sensing they wanted all of their faculties for the upcoming discussion.

“I’m not going to regurgitate our discussion the other day, Larman, which is probably good for our two young friends here. But I need to advise you of troubling issues that have arisen on my side of the ledger. Guillard is raising issues about me which are unfair at this late date.”

“What specifically is the problem?” asked Larman, taking a sip of his new drink.

“As we have discussed, Larman, I have done many favors for Alliance Pharmaceuticals in the past, and they have paid me handsomely. Not all of the payments have been legitimate, and much of it has been under the table.” Senator Eddelburg paused for a moment, looking around the room to study the reaction of Mixie and Rod to his comments. He continued, “And, unfortunately, many of my activities on behalf of Alliance in Congress and at the agencies in Washington would not do well with any form of public scrutiny. These things, if exposed, would destroy me, but they would cause Alliance major negative ramifications. I mean people in high places would go to jail.”

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“How do these things arise as an issue now?” asked Larman, not seeming to be surprised by the senator’s comments.

“My time on this earth is short, Larman. That is no secret. I have been desperate for some time to get my hands on this gohida ama. Yes, desperate from the day I heard about it from Mrs. Satterly. It seemed like a wild story from the beginning, but when something gives you a ray of hope, you don’t let it slip away until the impossibility of its existence is proven to you. And you know, Larman, it’s never been proven to me. I understand that any such substance, even if I could get a hold of it, might have major negative ramifications, but at my stage in this world, it would be worth the gamble.”

“Well, it appears that there is some chance that the company will continue to pursue gohida ama,” said Larman.

Senator Eddelburg seemed to stop for moment, and think about his next comments. “Well, there is a slight chance of that, of course. But Guillard has been very negative to me, and I think he has convinced Banion that I am dangerous to them, and it would be a mistake to bring me in on any actual receipt or use of gohida ama. I’m more and more convinced they will double cross me at the end, just before they get their hands on the formula and even gohida ama, itself.”

Rod felt somewhat uneasy. He looked at Mixie, and she was staring back at him. Should Mixie and I leave the room, he wondered. But Mixie would probably not join me if I offered to leave, he thought, and I’m not about to let her hear these confessions without me here.

Larman looked over at Rod. He hesitated for a moment, but then turned to Senator Eddelburg and said, “Senator, did you do as we discussed last week?”

“You mean regarding the tapes and documents?” Senator Eddelburg asked.

“Yes, those things concerning the transactions with Alliance, and the event last year,” said Larman, calmly.

“Event, last year?” asked Rod.

“Yes, an unfortunate event undertaken by Alliance Pharmaceuticals,” said Larman looking at the senator. “No need to discuss it in detail here, however.”

“Yes, I delivered the package with the materials to your box, as you suggested,” said Senator Eddelburg. “Unfortunately, I got in a heated conversation with Banion and Guillard last night, and this is what concerns me now.”

“You didn’t tell them what you were doing, did you?” asked Larman, as he put down his glass, now empty.

“They were suggesting that I wait for any treatment by gohida ama, and they were giving excuses why they would not pay me what they had promised if we

found gohida ama. We had an agreement early on that my daughter would get ten million dollars if I died or was incapacitated after we found the formula.”

“You’re not suggesting that you told them about the recordings and the documents, are you?” asked Larman, now with a look of some alarm on his face.

“I mentioned I had some very harmful materials I could use if I was double-crossed in this situation,” answered the senator. Rod could see some perspiration now forming on his forehead.

“Did you say anything about giving this material to me?” Larman asked, continuing to stare directly at Senator Eddelburg.

“No, of course not,” replied the senator, “But I did get them agitated. Yes, really agitated.”

“I’m not so concerned about myself. I may not live more than several months. But, I think they will deny my daughter what is due to her. I need to protect her, Larman.”

Larman said, “Senator, I’m not sure how we can guarantee any payments to your daughter short of blackmail, but I’m concerned you have put your own immediate safety at risk. Don’t underestimate how desperate these people at Alliance might be at this point, and your possible suggestion of blackmail would be a real problem for them. Even if gohida ama proves not to exist, they are going to be very nervous about your knowledge, and more importantly, your documentation of the company’s improprieties.”

“What would you advise, counselor?” asked Senator Eddelburg.

“I would say nothing further to them about any threats. I would suggest that you lay low for the immediate future, and await any further developments from the mystery seller, just like the rest of us. Keep them relaxed, senator.”

The senator excused himself, and left the room. Rod looked at Larman, who was looking into space, shaking his head from side to side. Mixie stood up from her chair, also in deep thought.

“This is a lot to digest in one day,” she said. “Is there anything else we need to do tonight?”

“No, nothing else tonight. The next step is to hear from our mystery seller. The ball’s in his court, at this point,” answered Larman, pulling on his jacket.

One thing still bothered Rod. “Larman, what was the ‘event’ that he mentioned and said he had a record of?”

“A very troubling and illegal act,” answered Larman, “but it is better that you don’t know the details at this time.”

“Are you concerned that the senator will say too much more to Banion and Anton Guillard?” asked Mixie, as she gathered her things to leave.

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“I’m concerned with the senator. He’s now a desperate man, as are each of his associates. This is a dangerous time for us all. We’re at the apex of our apocalypse. Everything from now on is potentially fatal to someone.”

As Rod and Mixie walked out to get their cars, they discussed the meeting quietly, so as to keep all of the details from being heard by anyone around them. “That was a heavy ending,” he said to Mixie.

“I can’t believe all the parts to this case,” she said.

“I wonder what tomorrow will bring?” he said, as they parted ways for the evening.

###

Chapter Twenty-One

The Arrangements

As expected, Larman got an email from an anonymous sender, probably from a library or other public facility. It came around one the next afternoon. Larman conveyed the message to Banion, Rod, and Mixie, but asked that it be kept strictly confidential. He said there would be a meeting at eight that night, since he had some critical business to transact with another firm client.

Rod read the text of the message:

“To: Larman Kingfund:

This will be the last message from me regarding this matter.

I trust you and your client are satisfied with the proof of the existence and effectiveness of gohida ama. It is the only proof I can give you without losing the formula to you, so it will be the only evidence I will give you. If it is not satisfactory, I will go to the next purchaser.

The terms of the purchase are strictly as follows:

On Wednesday at exactly 9 a. m. in the morning, EST, you shall be given the formula with instructions for use, by transmittal to an available computer. The computer will be provided to you at the appropriate time. Upon seeing the message on the screen of the computer, you shall have two minutes to insert the following password in the space indicated on the screen: BBYUXW. If this password is not given within the two-minute period, our deal is off, and I will move on. Do not try to use any means to copy the screen during this two-minute period, since our technology will preclude it and there are multiple screens to view. When you insert the code, it will transmit to us a signal transferring a wire from your account to our European account, which cannot be recovered or stopped. Attached to this message are the detailed directions on how to set up the funds to be wired. The formula and use instructions will remain in the computer for your use only if the wire is transmitted during this two-minute period; otherwise, it will be completely erased, without any ability to recover it. I assure you, no examination of the memory of the computer will allow recovery.

This will be my last communication to you. The complete wiring instructions are included below:"

Rod read the instructions for the funding and for wiring the fifty million dollars that followed. It appeared to go to a Swiss or German account, but it was coded, and might be difficult to trace, he knew. Then Rod read the entire message again. Seems like a sophisticated approach, he thought. I wonder if Banion's technical team can figure out a way around the transfer. Rod was sure that Alliance Pharmaceuticals would try to outwit the seller and get any formula without paying the money demanded.

There was a more basic question that Rod pondered after reading the message a third time. Banion, and especially Guillard, didn't sound like they were satisfied that the formula could be for real, and the likelihood of Alliance Pharmaceuticals actually sending the money seemed unlikely to Rod. He figured that Wednesday would come and go without any action by Alliance, but it would be fun to watch it breakdown, he thought. Rod also wondered why Larman remained somewhat guarded in his comments about a potential purchase of the formula, since Rod knew his client, Professor Hippa, clearly wanted the formula. It was always Rod's impression that Professor Hippa might only be a front person for certain substantial industry players who were desperate to get their hands on a formula for gohida ama.

Rod talked to Larman that afternoon, and his boss reported that Banion had indicated that Alliance would be crazy to advance the fifty million dollars with such a loose guarantee that it would get anything, or that anything of the nature of this substance actually existed. Though Banion couldn't explain the research on Thomas Red Cloud, or the enthusiasm of the two experts in connection with the glimpse of the formula, he assured Larman that no such money was leaving the company under his watch. On the other hand, Larman chuckled over his observation that Banion was doubling down on his research and technical assignments in the company to crack a fraud, if one existed as he surmised. Larman figured that Banion might not risk losing the possibility of getting the formula by expended time during any transmission on trying to circumvent the procedure.

Whoever this mystery seller is, thought Rod, he plays a good bluff, and he sends little information. Rod expected that Banion might be accepting the fact that this person might be serious about giving them one chance, and one chance only, before moving to a competitor.

Rod also thought about Larman. He could hold his cards close to his chest, too. If his client really wanted that formula, any good attorney would be checking out all of the questions concerning the transaction. Rod suspected that

Larman was working overtime to research the angles, but was doing it without a broadcast of information to him, or anyone else. And Mixie was working on special assignments for Larman. Rod certainly realized that Larman had kept her investigation unknown to him, and it sort of hurt. Rod assumed that Mixie's assignments involved some undisclosed due diligence being conducted for Professor Hippa and his people.

Rod also thought about Senator Eddelburg, and how he fit into everything that was happening. He clearly had shown symptoms of his poor health, and his stress. He seemed to be a problem for Banion, if he described correctly his evidence against the company, and his fear of being double-crossed by Alliance at the end of their relationship. Rod wondered what he might be up to these last few days.

Rod felt like a fifth wheel in the operations. Larman was doing things he knew nothing about. Mixie apparently was his new confidant. Banion and Guillard appeared to treat him as a minor character, at least in his mind. Rod was frustrated, and his thoughts next turned to Gerri, who was mad at him, he surmised, for not making any commitments to her. It was a depressing afternoon, he acknowledged. Rod slipped on his running shoes, and jogged five miles, which was good exercise, but didn't take his mind off the obvious chaos in his life.

As he figured it was time to head back to his apartment, he came around the side of the downtown hotel where everyone had met the other day. He looked in the large window of the bar area and spotted Senator Eddelburg at one of the small tables, apparently sitting alone. Rod waved in the window, but the senator apparently did not see him, so he entered the bar and went over to where the senator was sitting.

"Thought I'd say hello," said Rod, as he approached the senator's table.

Senator Eddelburg gulped down his drink, and rose from his chair. "Son, I was just thinking about you and Larman Kingfund. Sit down and join an old man who hates to drink alone."

Rod pulled up a chair, as the senator waived to a waitress to bring another round of drinks. It was an awkward situation, thought Rod, since he was hot and sweaty, and was sure his company came at a price.

The two men exchanged some small talk, and the senator reminisced about his family and life in Washington. Rod thought he seemed sad, and his breathing appeared to be labored.

Senator Eddelburg looked over at Rod, and was quiet for a few seconds. "Son, I have some concerns that trouble me immensely. I have confided these issues to your boss, and I know you understand my fears about the upcoming

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days. I don't know you all that well, but I need to make sure you understand things. I trust Larman, but I need someone else to understand things."

"Understand what you told us yesterday?" asked Rod.

"I have more fear today than yesterday," he said quietly, looking across the room over Rod's shoulder. "Things are happening which I can't control. Things could happen because of my emotions and carelessness."

"Like what things?" asked Rod, now becoming confused as to where the senator was going with the conversation.

"I think I have been followed the last several days," continued Senator Eddelburg. "By whom, I don't know. My guess is that there is a connection with Alliance Pharmaceuticals because of what I know. And what I was foolish enough to threaten to disclose."

"You think you might be harmed?" asked Rod, though he knew what the senator was saying.

Senator Eddelburg took another swig of his drink, and set the glass on the table with a thump. He looked at Rod, and his eyes appeared bloodshot. "Young man, my days are numbered, and I realize it. I have spent many hours and great passion on attempting to find the magic elixir to allow me to enjoy life longer than scheduled. The ironic thing...the thing I fear, for some unexplained reason, is that I might be murdered before I can get the elixir."

"Why is the possibility of being murdered not a reason to be fearful?" asked Rod.

"It will shorten a life that has gone wrong, very wrong, in the last several years," said Senator Eddelburg. "My life doesn't deserve gohida ama. It doesn't deserve the possibility of extension. I know that well, but I cannot make myself fearless over the possibility of being murdered. Nor can I stand by and see my murderers being rewarded in the end."

"Who are you saying is trying to murder you?" responded Rod.

"What I know would finish Alliance and its top officers. It would put Banion and Guillard in jail without parole. I'm very dangerous to these people, and my services to them in the past mean nothing now. They are anxious, and they are ruthless."

"Why don't you go to the police?" asked Rod.

The waitress came over to the table before Senator Eddelburg could answer, but he turned to Rod and asked, "Another drink, young man?"

Rod didn't want the conversation with the senator to end, so he assented to another drink, though he had not finished his first one. The waitress brought the two drinks immediately, as the men watched in silence. When the drinks

were delivered, Senator Eddelburg turned back towards Rod, and leaned across the table.

In a soft voice, he said, "Young man, the police are not an option. I'm too deep into this whole thing to get the police involved. And as a senator, I can get protection, but it's impossible here, since this dirty business must stay confidential; for my sake, it must stay as our secret."

"You could carry a gun," said Rod, trying to be helpful.

"I think it's too late for that," responded Senator Eddelburg. "It's probably too late for me to do anything."

Rod didn't know where the conversation was going. He could see that the senator was becoming inebriated, and he felt helpless to soothe his concerns.

"Can I take you home, senator?" asked Rod, and he got up from his chair.

"No young man, I'm safest here with my thoughts," said Senator Eddelburg. "But, young man, make sure that Larman does what he said he would do."

Rod thought briefly of the conversation between Larman and the senator yesterday, and nodded his head in acknowledgement. He shook the senator's hand and walked back out to the street. It was getting dark now, and he knew he needed to head home, for he was to meet Gerri for dinner in an hour.

The next several days were a blur in Rod's mind, since he remained focused on Wednesday morning and the decision to buy or not buy the formula for gohida ama. He realized much work was being done in anticipation of the decision and possible implementation of gohida ama, but he felt little stress over the decision since he didn't feel directly involved. Larman appeared to be working with others, and probably Mixie was busy now, Rod thought.

He knew he had personal decisions to make as the drama with gohida ama seemed to be coming to a climax. Gerri was his girlfriend still, Rod felt, but she was perceptively cool the last several dates, and he knew she was looking for some kind of commitment from him. Furthermore, Rod weighed the alternative to living in Calhoun against the choice of returning to New York, and all it meant to his career and life. It was a difficult time to relax.

Tuesday night, Larman called Rod, and invited him to dinner with Mixie. It was an early dinner, and Rod had the feeling it marked the eve of the closing of the gohida ama case. Mixie had a striking red dress for the occasion, and Rod knew she had been back to Atlanta to do some clothes shopping. With matching red shoes, and a plunging neckline, Rod had to admit she was spellbinding. Larman even dressed in a jacket and tie, which certainly was a switch for him during their stay in Calhoun. The place Larman had chosen for dinner was the best French restaurant in Calhoun, *La Chanson*. Actually, Rod felt a little underdressed, wearing only a blue jacket without tie. How could Larman host

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such an event with all the pressure of the morning being so imminent? Rod wondered.

Larman, more continental than either Mixie or Rod had imagined, ordered cocktails and two bottles of some fine French wine for them. Two bottles? thought Rod. Hanging around with Larman could make him an alcoholic.

The restaurant was small, but the decorations and motif were very French, and well anointed. The three of them had a very private back room table, and the rest of the room was empty, and pretty isolated from the remainder of the restaurant. The waiter, a middle-aged balding man with a few meals under his belt, occasionally would come into the room to make sure everything was just right, and Rod realized Larman wanted everything perfect, too.

"It's been a long three and a half months here," Larman said, after toasting Mixie's new dress. "I appreciate, and the firm appreciates, your hard work for this assignment."

Rod was feeling somewhat guilty, since many days he had nothing to do except contact New York for his email messages. Mixie gracefully absorbed Larman's comments, and seemed very relaxed under the circumstances.

"Oh, Larman, I have enjoyed working with you, and will be happy to assist you, anytime," she said, with her best smile and eye contact with the senior partner.

"Likewise," said Rod, holding his glass in a toast to Larman, though Rod felt somewhat overshadowed by Mixie's apparent flirtation with her boss.

Larman proceeded to tell war stories about his early days in the New York firm, and repartee continued between Larman and Mixie, as several rounds of drinks were consumed. Rod listened, but said little, as he stirred a cherry around his drink. The salads were delivered, and then the main course, as the candles on the table worked down and the wax fell into the holding case.

"What do you think of this offer of gohida ama, Larman? Do you think it's real, or just a fraud?" asked Rod, when there was a slight lull in the conversation.

"Well, I think it certainly is a possible history making event," Larman said, smiling at Rod, "And I have a client who has paid mega dollars to pursue it. I wouldn't have led him along if I didn't believe in the possibilities here."

"And the involvement of Alliance?" asked Rod.

"Alliance has the deep pockets. Professor Hippa and I realized that early on," continued Larman, "but I keep my eye on them, and never turn my back. You heard the senator talk about them, and he has made some accusations which are pretty devastating....I mean terribly incriminating, to say the least."

"And he gave you some proof of his claims?" asked Rod, verbalizing the thoughts he was having since meeting with the senator earlier in the week.

Larman looked at his young associate. He said nothing, and then turned to Mixie, and smiled. "Yes, Rod, I have something from the senator, but I haven't really checked the material he gave me. I'll look at shortly, I'm sure."

Rod was puzzled by Larman's indifference to the senator and his material. Larman turned to Mixie to continue a conversation, but Rod interrupted him. "Larman, the accusations that Senator Eddelburg told us on Monday were very serious. He said he had fears that he might be harmed because of what he knew."

"Yes, I know," said Larman, "but I didn't know he felt threatened."

Rod was aware that Larman had not been at the last meeting he had with the senator, and Rod didn't feel like relating those conversations at this meeting. "Yes, that's the feeling I had when we last saw the senator," continued Rod.

Mixie was now working on a French cake for dessert. She turned to Rod, and said, "Well Rod, the senator has all the protection anyone would need. I'm sure he can take care of himself." With that, the conversation about the senator ended.

Mixie glanced toward Larman and said, "Larman, these last three and a half months haven't been much about your specialty of intellectual property law, have they?"

"Well, not exactly, so far," Larman answered, "but if we get that formula tomorrow, it could be all about securing that secret substance, though under the agreement we now have with Alliance, our client only gets a small percentage of the profits."

"That would be great, Larman. I would love to work on that patent case under your tutelage, of course," said Mixie, smiling again, as she pushed her dessert plate away from her. "Oh, and Rod could help us, too."

It was nice being an afterthought, felt Rod. He smiled slightly, turning to Mixie. "I may not be going back to New York when this is over," he said.

"Is that so?" said Larman, somewhat surprised.

"Well, I'm not completely decided, yet," said Rod, but it's looking like a good possibility that I will settle here. Hopefully, Brad Soppenburg can give me a job in his firm."

"Is there a romantic incentive?" asked Mixie, with her special pout.

"My feelings are not totally clear to me at this point," said Rod, becoming serious in tone. "It's just something I've been thinking about."

"We certainly would miss a talented young man like you, Rod," said Larman, wiping his mouth with his napkin. "I'm sure we would promote you to a number of our departments, at your choice, of course."

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“I’ve always found you to be very competent,” said Mixie, tilting her head slightly, and giving Rod a funny grin. “Though I understand your interest in Calhoun. I’ve enjoyed it here myself.”

“You’ve enjoyed it?” asked Rod, having interest in her comment.

“I’ve given some random thought to staying here. Yes, nothing decided, of course.”

“You, too?” asked Larman, now smiling broadly.

“Oh, well, I certainly have no definite plans other than to return to New York,” she said.

Rod was full now, and regardless of the excitement over tomorrow’s activities, he felt ready for sleep. Mixie’s comments stayed in his mind as he walked to his car. And Larman was emphatic as they left the restaurant. They must meet him at his house at five in the morning to get ready for the contact from the mysterious seller. It would be quite a day, thought Rod, as he headed home for a few hours of rest.

###

Chapter Twenty-Two

The Decision

Larman's house was a beehive of activity, even at five. It was Wednesday morning and D-Day had arrived. Rod knew everything would come together or fall apart in the next several hours. Banion was in the corner on his phone when Rod had arrived, and Guillard was directing various technicians around the room to get a complex communication system set up. Dr. Hapton sat at the bar, using the countertop for his several laptop computers, and Professor Hippa was busy taking notes in a binder on the coffee table. Mixie was on her phone, and Larman was greeting everyone like it was a major social event at his rented home. Rod could tell that Banion felt extreme pressure, since he continually sat down, and immediately stood up, culminating in going to the window and back. It also was clear to Rod that Guillard and Banion were not in full agreement over something, and their attitudes towards each other seemed somewhat acidic. At about seven, two more men arrived and huddled with Banion and Guillard, but Rod was not introduced, nor did he know for sure their capacity at this gathering. The seats in the room were soon filled with standing room only remaining. Rod slid from his seat and stood against the bar, observing everything which was going on around him.

As the clock on the wall approached the nine o'clock hour, Guillard sat down in the corner, folded his arms, and said nothing. Banion, on the other hand, kept talking on the phone one minute, and meeting with the two late arrivals, the next.

Larman must have been thinking the same thoughts as Rod, because during a lull in the conversations, he said, "Banion, is the wire transfer all teed up and ready to go?"

Banion looked at Larman for a second, and then glanced over at Guillard. "The money is not a problem," he answered, "but it is doubtful whether we will pull the trigger."

"If you're not going to wire the money, what's all of this about?" asked Larman, showing some surprise.

"Anton is adamant that this is a fraud. He has had several last-minute discussions with our Chairman of the Board this morning, and has kept me in

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the dark as to our final course of action,” explained Banion. “Knowing Anton’s views on this whole thing, my guess is that we are practicing for something sometime in the far future.”

“Alliance is not a company which gives large amounts of money to shysters,” said Guillard, and he folded his arms again, and stared at the wall. Apparently, this was the end of the discussion.

Rod, being one of many in the room, seemed confused by this conversation. What was the purpose of all of this?

“We’ll take a look at what they send,” said Guillard after several seconds of silence.

“It’s your call, then. It’s your responsibility. I’ve done everything I can,” said Banion, now sitting down on the one vacant chair in the room.

Everyone watched the clock on the wall. Several checked their watches to make sure everything was synchronized. Banion got up and stared out the front window, not knowing what to expect. Guillard stood up, and paced around the back of the room. There was heavy anticipation in the room. Rod glanced over at Mixie. She was sitting on one of the bar stools holding her knee up with her hands. She looked back at Rod, and gave him a knowing smile.

One minute before nine. Guillard walked over to the window and watched for any activity. There were several cars parked in the front of Larman’s rented house, and Rod knew they were filled with private detectives hired by Alliance.

Then it happened. A young man, in his early twenties, entered from the hallway. He apparently got into the house by the back door or from the basement. He, of course, was carrying a laptop computer under his arm. “Mr. Larman Kingfund, please,” he asked, checking his watch.

“How’d that guy get in here?” asked Banion.

“Through the walk-in basement,” the man answered, “Are you Mr. Kingfund?”

“No,” remarked Banion, appearing to be irritated.

“I need Mr. Kingfund, immediately,” the man said, again checking his watch.

“I’m Kingfund,” said Larman, stepping in front of the man, holding out his hand.

“Excellent,” said the man. “According to my explicit instructions, I’m to hand this computer to you at exactly.....nine o’clock, and press this bottom.” With that he pressed several keys on the computer, and handed it to Larman. “The man told me to tell you there will be only two minutes time.”

With that transfer of possession, the young man dashed from the room. “Let him go,” yelled Larman, “We have something more critical to do.” With that, Larman handed the computer to Banion, and several of the men, including

Guillard, rushed behind Banion to view the screen. Banion placed the computer on the top of the bar. Dr. Hapton rushed over to peer at the screen. Rod stayed out of the melee, and walked over and stood next to Mixie.

“Let Dr. Hapton take a look at this material,” yelled Banion, moving his arm to make room for Dr. Hapton. “Get Professor Hippa over here, too.” Both men scurried to get a position to study the screen. “Let me know what you see,” said Banion, now seeming to be in panic mode. “And you, Anton, you must see this also.”

Professor Hippa joined the rush of the small crowd behind the computer, and his pad was knocked from his hand as he tried to write some quick notes from what he observed on the screen.

Banion glanced down at his watch. “Hurry, gentlemen, the seconds are running off. We only have eighty seconds left!”

For a man who will not forward any money, thought Rod, Banion is certainly concerned about the two minutes running out.

“Tell us, gentlemen, tell us what you see!” yelled out Guillard, who steadied himself against the top of the nearby chair. “Now is the time!”

Then there was a period of silence for approximately ten seconds. Rod looked around the room. Banion, Dr. Hapton, and Professor Hippa were staring at the computer screen, and Guillard was next to them holding the top of a chair. Larman was pouring himself a cup of coffee, which made no sense to Rod.

“Forty seconds!” yelled Banion, now frantically.

“Do you see where the code is inserted?” asked Guillard, in the same panic mode.

“Yes, I have it here,” responded Banion.

“It looks like a legitimate formula, and has some chemical designations I would assume are pertinent,” responded Dr. Hapton, “but I can’t be sure it would work.”

Banion looked back at his watch, and then yelled to Professor Hippa, “And what about you, Professor?”

“Looks promising,” said Professor Hippa, “but I can’t guarantee it is complete or will work.”

“Twelve seconds!” yelled out Banion. “What is it, Guillard, yes or no? Tell me, yes or no!”

Rod looked at Guillard. The man looked ill. His face was bright red, and he looked like he was about to get sick. The others in the room all turned to look at Guillard.

“Seven seconds!” yelled Banion. “Come on, Guillard, it’s now or never!”

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“Put in the code, put in the code!” yelled Guillard, as he staggered back to the couch.

Banion grabbed the computer and feverishly pounded out the code.

The alarm on Banion’s watch made a quiet whirling sound. If Banion wanted to send the fifty-million-dollar transfer, he better have typed the code correctly, thought Rod, because there were no second chances. The two-minute time period had expired.

“Hah,” yelled Banion, “It shows the money has gone.” He placed the computer on the top of the countertop again, but continued to stare at the screen. “Dr. Hapton, get over here and copy this formula immediately. We made it just in time.”

Rod looked over at Guillard. He was sitting at the end of the couch, but his eyes were closed, and his hands folded in front of him. I wonder what he is meditating about, thought Rod.

Professor Hippa joined Dr. Hapton at the computer, and the two scientists wrote feverishly to copy the formula and the notes on the screen.

“First screen completed,” said Dr. Hapton, as he pressed the button for the next screen.

“Make sure you guys get everything exact,” yelled out Banion, as he stepped back from the bar. “I assume we’ll double check your work later, but I want to get it all before anything happens to the screen.”

“Page two, done!” yelled out Dr. Hapton, throwing a yellow lined sheet of paper unto the bar.

Larman walked over to the bar. He held his hand out to Banion. “Congratulations, it looks like you have the most important formula in the history of man.” Banion looked at him, but said nothing. He was still numb from the earlier drama, and knew he was not home yet.

“Hey, look at this!” yelled out Dr. Hapton.

“Whoa, stop!” said Professor Hippa.

Banion raced over to the computer to observe what they were seeing.

“The formula is being removed on the screen, one symbol at a time. We’re losing the rest of it. It’s disappearing!” yelled Dr. Hapton, now grabbing the bottom of the laptop computer. “This can’t be happening!”

“Give me that!” yelled Banion, as he took the computer and stared at the screen. “Stop it....stop it!” he yelled. “Damn, stop it now.”

Professor Hippa picked up the laptop. “The formula is disappearing....it is gone. It’sWait!”

Banion looked back at the screen. “It is coming back,” he said to Dr. Hapton. “Yes, I see it coming back.” He handed the laptop back to Dr. Hapton.

Rod looked at Guillard. He had his head in his hands, and seemed to be comatose. All eyes in the room were on Banion and Dr. Hapton. Banion looked back at the screen from the side of Dr. Hapton. There was a moment of silence, as the two men studied the screen.

Then Dr. Hapton said in a slow monotone voice, "The formula is being replaced with a message."

"A message?" asked Larman. "What kind of message?"

Dr. Hapton looked back at the screen. It says:

"Thank you for your reparations for the Cherokee Nation, and the many victims of the inhuman experiments conducted by Arnold Medical. Your money will be well used by the descendants. And by the way, there is no formula, and there certainly is no gohida ama. Signed, 'Victims of Inhumanity to Men.'"

"This always has been a fraud," yelled Banion, slamming his pad of paper to the floor. The men from Alliance stared at Banion, with a zombie-like appearance. Rod glanced down at Guillard, who was still motionless, holding his head in his hands.

There was no sound in the room. It was still until Guillard raised his head, and said to Banion, "You and I are finished. Our lives are over....our lives are over." He slowly rose from the couch, and walked across to the door, and disappeared down the hall.

Banion stared at the door, and said nothing. After several seconds, he said softly, "We will find these criminals. We will prosecute, and we will recover every cent of this money. That is a promise from Banion Catorre."

Rod was mesmerized by what he had just witnessed. Then he realized that one of the critical players was not in the room this morning. Where was Senator Eddelburg? he wondered. It was strange that, after everything that happened, the senator would be absent on this most critical day.

Banion was now red in the face, but the gravity of his predicament was not fully perceived. He was calmer now, and seemed to recognize that his career was over. He was trying to visualize how devastating it would be for him when he reported back to Alliance.

"We'll get those bastards. All our resources will get those bastards," Banion whispered loud enough for Rod to hear him clearly. He will be vindictive, thought Rod, assuming he has anything more to do with Alliance.

Banion finally rose from the couch, apparently wanting nothing more to do with this room or this project. As he walked slowly towards the door, Larman slid from behind the bar, and met Banion just before he left the room.

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“I’m sorry Senator Eddelburg couldn’t make it here this morning,” said Larman. “He left this material with me to give to you. Said it was very important.” Larman handed the sealed envelope to Banion, who opened it.

“Senator Eddelburg, how?” said Banion, seemingly somewhat confused.

As Banion examined the contents of the envelope, a videotape container fell from the envelope, and Banion picked it up, staring at it. He then pulled out a file, and glanced over the first few pages of the file. He looked up at Larman, and then returned his concentration to the papers in the file.

“I’m not sure what’s in that folder,” said Larman, “but Senator Eddelburg gave me an extra copy in case you lose anything.”

“Why....a copy?” said Banion, now seeming to be gathering his thoughts.

“Yes, he thought it would be good for me to have the material in case there was an investigation of this whole gohida ama matter.”

Banion turned and stared at Larman. The final piece just hit him. Now he fully understood. “I imagine there won’t be an investigation, after all,” he said.

Banion said nothing more, and walked out the door.

That was the last time Rod saw Banion or Guillard in Calhoun. And I guess he’d always remember that morning. It was the last time Alliance saw its fifty million dollars.

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Postscript

The New Chapter

It was a gorgeous day in Calhoun. The flowers were in bloom and the hillside behind Rod's house was beginning to show the green which signals that summer was coming. He sat on a chair in his backyard, and memories of this first time here in Calhoun came back to him in vivid detail. Of course, it was only six years ago now; several years before his marriage, and three years before the birth of his son, Michael. He watched the young boy run between the trees in his yard, as his wife playfully ran after him.

Yes, that was quite an introduction to Calhoun, he thought. That whole thing about the Cherokee substance and the formula in five steps seemed so ludicrous a scenario now, but was so real back when he was the big city associate trying to make the gigantic impression with Larman Kingfund. He even felt he could still feel the stress of those days. The close calls he encountered trying to find that formula still could make him shutter. It was such a scam, but so exciting a time, he mused. It will never be replaced in my memory, nor would I ever want to forget any minute of those experiences, he thought.

Yes, Larman had retired the month after that fateful day when the money was wired. It was a sudden retirement, and everyone at the firm in New York was shocked, but Rod felt he knew more than most about Larman's exit from the practice. And then there was Senator Eddelburg, and his tragic suicide the morning of the wire. That was a shock, and Rod never accepted it as a suicide. The authorities eventually did, so the matter was dropped. Rod thought next about the mystery person selling the formula. That was the grand hoax, which would never be fully explained. It was never disclosed to the authorities or the media, and Rod assumed Alliance characterized the expenditure in some obscure and ambiguous way, and it never saw the light of day on the stockholder's statements. A few heads rolled, of course, but Alliance moved ahead to its next transaction; though it never wanted to buy an Indian formula again, Rod guessed.

Rod had talked to Larman a few times after leaving Calhoun to get his things in New York. He even spent some time with his boss at the retirement party the firm threw for its important senior partner. Rod didn't characterize himself as a

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genius, but he could put together a few pieces of the mystery of how the fraud worked, and he had some ideas of how everything might have happened.

Rod guessed that Larman and Professor Hippa were part of the master plan for completing the sting, probably from the beginning. Rod learned from an article in a science magazine, which he read several years after the wiring of the funds, that Professor Hippa was part Cherokee, and his parents grew up in the Calhoun area back in the twenties and thirties. Larman may have been hired to coordinate the hook, for that matter, thought Rod. Larman might have been a Cherokee descendant himself, reasoned Rod, though he never could find any evidence of it.

And the fragments of formula which kept appearing for Alliance to study; Professor Hippa was the author of that formula, as well as its reviewer, thought Rod. The part with Thomas Red Cloud, that had to be the most complicated and well performed part of the sting. Rod only suspected that it was well acted, and the records well planted in the right places. He knew a little money in clerical hands, coupled with a dogged commitment to cover all bases where anyone might investigate this fictional man, had worked perfectly. Some investment of time and money thought Rod.

It took only one mistake for the whole sting to go down, and Rod was taken by the preparation and technology that must have been required to pull everything off. He wondered why Alliance Pharmaceuticals should be free from prosecution, in light of the revelations given by Senator Eddelburg to Larman that evening just before the wiring of the funds. But Larman knew what he was doing, and Rod assumed he needed to keep those revelations about the murder of Betsy Satterly and other criminal acts a secret in order to maintain his leverage over Alliance. The giant company was frozen from complaining about the sting, knowing Larman had proof of its wrongdoing and the wrongdoing of certain top-level officers of the company.

Rod's mind came back to the present. He knew he would never have all of the answers about the past. He knew a secret potion would not extend his life beyond its destined length. But my soul will remain concentrated, he said to himself, with a chuckle. And life was now good, and he had made the right decision six years ago to live in Calhoun, not the big city of New York. It was a different life, but the quality of his practice and the enjoyment of his family were all worth it. New York was to be enjoyed by others.

His young son Michael ran around the tree nearest him and fell into his lap. His wife ran up behind the child and stopped and laughed at the child's leap into Rod's lap.

"He sure loves to be with you," said his wife, with a big smile.

Richard Dodge Davidson

“Yes, Mixie, and I love to be here with both of you. It makes life worthwhile.”

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Notes from the author

Richard Dodge Davidson enjoys writing mystery novels, especially concerning lawyers and related professionals. Some of the material comes from experience, but much from interesting story lines in the news. Hopefully, you enjoyed this story and have specific opinions regarding the primary characters, their principles, and the lessons the novel attempts to convey. Mr. Davidson is interested in your comments and can be reached at rdavidson4@icloud.com.